

By the same author

SMILING TIGERS

THORN IN THE FLESH

RANDOM RENDEZVOUS

RANDOM MATING



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1

"**Q**UITTE the dreariest evening I have ever endured. How I wish I were tucked-up in bed with a slab of milk chocolate and a piping hot love-book."

Magdalen Cone, who by reason of her nun-style beauty and fancy habits was known to her admirers as The Fallen Angel, sagged still deeper into the sofa cushions. Grappling with a half-pint tumbler of pink gin, she glumly surveyed the crowded ballroom.

It was a depressing sight indeed. A bored band, conducted by an insufferable blond joy-boy, was grinding out the hackneyed hit-tunes of the moment. Seventy uncouth young women, culled from the current crop of London debutantes, were shambling round the parquet in the arms of the usual fatigue-parties from the Household Cavalry, the Foot Guards and the Royal Horse Artillery. One and all wore the sulky snarl of victims whose hostess has economised on the champagne.

"I feel," declared Magdalen, "that the post-war social revolution has let me down. When we all went bolshie in 1945 I thought we were finished with this kind of caper. I looked forward to snatching my daughter from school the instant she was fifteen and shoving her out to earn, sharpish ; after which she would marry a Communist shop-steward and speedily be in a position to make me a substantial weekly allowance. How wrong I was. All the old nonsense has survived intact ; and, as a conscientious parent, I've had to put the brat through the whole ruinous fandango : assorted governesses, four years at St.

Goneril's, a year at that Do-the-Girls-Hall in Paris, and now *this*."

"I think," said Bessie Galway-Blazer, topping up her glass of neat brandy, "that you're showing a very pauper spirit, Maggy. If you can't give your daughter a modest coming-out dance without grousing and nattering all night . . ."

"It's all very well for you to talk. You haven't got a daughter; only that charming boy Gerald. And he's off your hands now."

"On the contrary. He'll be back on them again at any moment."

"Surely not?"

"Too true. We've just heard that he comes out tomorrow."

"But I thought he got five years."

"He did, but his conduct has been so exemplary that he's got the maximum remission. The Governor took a great fancy to him and put him in charge of the library. And he's been running a very successful art class, too. No doubt it was his artistic talent that inclined him to forgery."

"Well, you have my sympathy," said Magdalen. "But I still maintain that a delinquent son isn't half such a liability as a dowdy daughter. After all, your Gerald has at least *tried* to start earning, whereas my Rose is nothing but a dead loss. God knows I do my best, hemming her in on all sides with gorgeous stock-jobbers and commercial-television producers and the like; but all she seems to fancy are tepid university dons with ornamental waistcoats and the silliest little incomes that wouldn't suffice to support her, never mind me. The whole thing is most unsatisfactory and discouraging. The modern girl, I fear, has no sense of responsibility towards her parents. I

often feel quite thankful that my poor husband tumbled off that horse. He has been spared a deal of bitter disappointment. If he hadn't broken his neck, his daughter would have broken his heart."

"Well, the girl seems to be doing her best tonight," said Bessie, pointing towards the far end of the room. "She's got her hooks in a proper slasher at the moment . . . my word, Maggy, who is he? A regular tearaway and no error."

Magdalen craned her neck and promptly upset half her gin. "Upon my soul. It's Guy Random."

"You mean that wonderful man who fixes anything for anybody at a moment's notice?"

"That's it. But you'd better not let him hear you calling him a Fixer. He's very touchy about his professional status. Negotiator is the term he insists upon : Guy Random, the eminent Negotiator."

She stood up as the band stopped playing and waved her arms. "Guy! Guy, my weeny rammikin!"

He turned and came towards them with the relaxed poised gait of a prowling cheetah. The exquisitely cut evening clothes emphasised the wide flat shoulders and negligible hips. The smooth fair hair was beautifully barbered and brushed up over the ears in rakish wings. The neat sharp features were dyed with a deep copper tan.

He bowed with elaborate courtesy and pressed his lips to Magdalen's fingers, his pale blue eyes and perfect teeth flashing in the notorious grin.

"The Fallen Angel! More handsome than ever and twice as succulent. I could munch you raw, and that without condiments."

She fondly patted his cheek. "Ah, that incomparable Random technique. Smoother than ever and twice

as deadly. Tell me, how did you happen to stray into this ghastly wake? Surely I didn't send you an invitation?"

"Good God, no. My presence is purely accidental. I was padding home, after dining round the corner with Clare Crest, when a cab drew up ahead of me and disgorged the most delicious little ravishment I've clapped eyes on for many a long, long year. She drifted in here, so I slid into her slip-stream with a view to picking her off."

"And have you found her?"

"I haven't had a chance yet. I'd no sooner crossed the threshold than I was ambushed by yonder thumping great hockey-girl who haled me onto the floor and promptly began to kick my legs from under me. Who is she, Maggy? The public ought to be warned."

"You refer, I fancy, to my daughter."

"Surely you jest?"

"I have never felt less jocose in all my life. It's the stark truth."

He folded his arms and shook his head. "I refuse to believe that Magdalen Cone ever did anything like that. There must be some mistake."

"There was. A big one. Eighteen years ago, after the Quorn hunt ball. Since when I have never mixed brandy and green chartreuse."

Guy nodded and took her arm. "Never mind. We all have to learn the hard way. Let's retire to some sequestered nook and sip ourselves rigid."

"What about this doxy you're after?"

"She can wait. I have a business proposition I'd like to discuss with you. That's if you're interested in earning a little pin-money."

"I certainly am. This gruicome fiesta has just

about cleaned me out. Come upstairs where we can talk in peace."

They scuttled down by the remains of the log-fire in Magdalen's sitting-room.

"Well? What's this proposition? I'm ready to consider anything so long as it doesn't involve mental or physical activity."

"Tranquillise yourself," replied Guy. "I never ask the impossible. You know Tom Brown?"

"You mean the Chairman of Domestic Electronics?"

"That's the chap. It seems they've had a record year's trading, and Tom is by way of giving a slap-up dinner party to the Board of Directors in celebration. He's asked me to arrange the after dinner entertainment."

"Hardly your line of country, surely?"

"In this case, yes; because the entertainment he has in mind is something rather special. The American influence creeping in again. He fancies a pieful of bare women."

"How very juvenile. But I suppose millionaires usually are. Go on."

"A dozen really toothsome goblets are required, at a hundred guineas a time; and it occurs to me that a few of my girl-friends may as well have the money as anyone else. After all, a hundred guineas is a hundred guineas in these days."

"How sweet of you, Guy. But then you always were so kind and thoughtful. And you're offering me a niche?"

"That's the idea. How do you feel about it?"

"I shall be delighted to accept. Who else have you invited?"

"There's Clare Crest, and Kate Pocket, and Myra Sheath, and Louise Gale, and . . ."

"Stop, stop! It's no use. I couldn't possibly occupy a pie with that sample."

"But why not? They're all nice well-bred girls with cleanly habits and a sound Christian background."

"I know. But it would be so damned uncomfortable. They all *jut* so."

Guy frowned and rubbed his chin. "There's something in what you say. I hadn't thought of that. Now just let me think."

Presently he sat up and slapped his knee. "I have it, Maggy! We'll introduce a novel angle. Instead of one big pie, we'll have twelve individual pies. Then everybody will be comfortable."

"But how brilliant of you, Guy. The perfect solution. In that case you can count me in. How do you think of these things?"

Guy shrugged modestly. "It's my job, Maggy. As a top-level professional Negotiator it's my business to arrange matters to everyone's satisfaction."

Magdalen looked at him with admiration. "I hear you're doing tremendously well, Guy. I was dining with Sir Humphrey Clinker the other night, and he's still talking about the way you handled that *Tears of Venus* affair down on the Costa Brava last summer. He says that everybody is after your services nowadays, and that you charge the most fantastic fees. Lucky fellow."

"Come, come. You make me sound like a nasty money-grubbing old Shylock. I adjust my fees according to the client's ability to pay. The art of Negotiation, like Medicine and the Law, is governed by a strict code of professional ethics. I regularly set aside a proportion of my time for needy and deserving cases which I handle at reduced fees or none at all. I would never dream of asking a fee

from a clergyman of the Church of England, for example ; or from any old soldier who marched and fought with the Eighth Army ; or from a lady with a disaster like yours to marry off."

"Very praiseworthy. I begin to wonder how you can afford that super-luxury flat and the black Bristol and the three different tailors for coats, waistcoats and trousers."

"By providing *pâté de femme nue* for industrial millionaires, and charging accordingly."

Magdalen sighed and stood up. "Well, I suppose I must be getting back to this dismal fiasco downstairs. Thank you so much for this culinary engagement. I'll make a note of it in my diary and stand by for further orders. Are you coming down to look for your little ravishment ? I can't think who she is. I should be very much surprised if any of Rose's friends was up your cul-de-sac."

"I assure you that the fleeting glimpse I got of this one was in the highest degree appetising. Dark, sultry, and pre-eminently . . . jutting." He stretched and yawned. "However, I don't think I'll bother with the matter any further. That brawl with your daughter has effectively quelled my animal passions for this evening. I shall go home and have a nice hot cup of cocoa to settle my nerves."

They were interrupted by a heavy thud and a smothered exclamation from close at hand. Magdalen spun around, looking towards the interior door, on the opposite side of the room, which was standing ajar. After a moment's hesitation she tiptoed across the carpet, eased the door open and flicked on the light-switch—only to flick it off again in the same movement.

"So sorry . . . I'd no idea . . . please don't disturb yourselves . . ."

Out in the corridor, Magdalen shook her head and shrugged. "I can't say I blame them. It's a damn dull party. But they might at least have chosen one of the spare rooms instead of mine."

"No doubt," murmured Guy soothingly, "they were in a hurry."

2

It was midnight when Guy got back to his flat in Chestnut Square. After changing into sweater and slacks, he retired to his private snugger adjoining the elegant drawing-room where he received his clients.

The central feature of this cosy den was a dilapidated sofa of extreme comfort drawn up in front of a perpetually burning coke stove. Sited within arm's reach were a pipe rack, a table loaded with tea kit, and the fifth limb of the professional Negotiator—a telephone.

Here, in the still hours of the night, and enveloped in an asphyxiating fug, Guy devoted himself to the problems of his harassed customers. 'The trickiest situation,' he was fond of observing, 'will always yield to a pipe of tobacco, a pot of tea and an hour's quiet meditation.' And the dazzling array of famous names in his appointment book supplied ample proof of that contention. Indeed, no less a personage than Sir Roland Gander had lately declared, in the presence of a select gathering in the Athenæum, that 'Without the lubricant activities of Guy Random, the wheels of civilised social intercourse would inevitably falter and grind to a stop.'

Taking a folder from the filing cabinet, Guy settled down to study his notes on a delicate affair involving a distinguished banker, a young lady from a back street in Málaga, and a quantity of unfortunate photographs. After prolonged negotiations of extreme complexity, the affair had reached a critical stage. A single decisive stroke might now suffice to put his client in the clear. On the other hand, a single false step could prove disastrous.

His meditations were interrupted by the ringing of his door-bell. He glanced at the clock, thinking that he must be mistaken. But the summons was quickly repeated, and even more urgently. With a sigh of exasperation he tossed aside his papers, crossed the hall and opened up.

The day-to-day experiences of his occupation had long since rendered him surprise-proof. Nevertheless, he could not now suppress a slight elevation of the eyebrows. There was no doubt about it : the young lady standing on his doorstep was the delicious little ravishment who had so recently tickled his fancy.

He stood back and bowed. "Pray come in. This is indeed a singular pleasure."

She stepped into the hall with a charming little show of hesitant shyness. "I'm terribly sorry to disturb you at this time of night, Mr. Random ; but I . . . I just have to see you. . . ."

Her low-pitched husky voice faded out in an engaging breathless gasp.

"Enchanted," said Guy. "But you seem to have the advantage of me."

"I'm Nan Tucket."

"Say that again. I like it."

"*Nan Tucket.*"

"What a delightful name. Perhaps you would care

to join me in a cup of tea. There's a dirty black brew all ready in my study."

He relieved her of her beautiful Spanish shawl and put her in the sofa, beside him. Under cover of the preliminary pleasantries and the tea-pouring, he scrutinised her expertly. She was well worth it. The gleaming black hair had a soft natural wave, and was cut in a childish fringe above eyes of a deep velvety brown. The nose was a trifle too small, the mouth a good deal too wide. Her figure was of the type that greatly appealed to him : a juvenile fragility of bone-structure combined, provokingly, with the full-blown curves of maturity. As she leaned towards him to take her cup, his nostrils twitched under the acrid hot skin-scent of the genuine brune, reinforced by an ungrudging dosage of *Vierge Folle*.

"And now, my dear young lady; may I enquire to what I owe this altogether unexpected honour? Is your visit a social one? Or do you, perhaps, wish to consult me professionally? In either case I am entirely at your service."

"Well, as a matter of fact, I've come to ask you a rather impertinent question, I'm afraid."

"Believe me, I shall only be too happy to give you any information that lies within my power. What do you wish to know?"

"I'd like to know if you've still got a vacant pic."

The teaspoon in his saucer tinkled very faintly. For the first time in twenty years, if only for a fraction of a second, the celebrated Random aplomb had been penetrated.

"Because if you have," she continued, "I should very much like to make application for the tenancy thereof."

"I see," replied Guy quietly, reaching for his box

of matches. "Excuse me a moment whilst I stoke up."

As he relit his pipe, his glance fell upon her hands linked in the lap of her very stylish evening gown. They were the hands of a little girl : thin, fine boned, with clearly defined knuckles, the nails filed short and guiltless of varnish.

He experienced a curious sensation ; so curious, indeed, that it took him a full five seconds to identify it. He was —— shocked. That such a proposition should come from this appealing picture of school-room innocence was remarkable enough. But that was not all. The fact that she was conversant with the pie-scheme clearly indicated that it was she whose social activities had been so unhappily interrupted by Magdalen Conc two hours ago.

He flicked the spent match into the fire and turned to her with his customary expression of suave courtesy. "I see that you believe in coming straight to the point, Miss Tucket ; and so, too, do I. The answer is 'No.' "

She recoiled, wide-eyed. "You mean that there isn't a vacancy ? "

"Precisely."

"Oh, but please ! You can't mean that, surely ? I wouldn't let you down, honestly I wouldn't. If only you'd give me a chance. . . ."

"Alas, my dear Miss Tucket, it is quite impossible. My team is complete, together with a full set of reserves in case of illness or other mishap. I greatly regret that I have to disappoint you, but there is nothing I can do about it."

He turned to refill his cup. When he looked round again she was sitting huddled up on the cushions, her lips trembling and two big glittering tears sliding down her matt-cream cheeks.

It was as if a hand had reached into his breast and crushed his heart. The cool, calculating detachment engendered by years of professional expertise dissolved in an instant. Without a moment's consideration he put aside his cup, slid along the sofa and took her in his arms.

"Why, my poor little pet, whatever is the matter? There, there! Come now, tell me all about it."

She relaxed against him, her head on his shoulder, her wet cheeks pressed into his neck. Her voice was a pathetic snuffling whimper.

"Oh, Guy . . . oh, Guy . . . I do so want to be in a pie. . . ."

"And so you shall, my love. I promise you. I was a cad to try and put you off like that. Don't give it another thought. You're in!"

At this she withdrew her face from his neck and gave him a dazzling smile. "Then there is a vacancy, after all?"

"No, my sweet, there isn't. But we'll damn well make one. It occurs to me that Tom Brown, as Chairman, rates a couple of pies. We'll stuff Maggy Cone in one, and you in t'other."

When he had tenderly dried her eyes and wiped her nose-end with his cologne-scented handkerchief, she showed no inclination to move. Instead, she drew up her legs and lay back against his chest. When she had at last finished wriggling she lit a cigarette and sighed contentedly.

"All right now?" he enquired. "Comfy?"

"I'm all right. But Tweedledum and Tweedledee are a mite lonesome."

"I'm afraid I don't quite follow you."

She reached for his hands and drew them inwards. "There. And there."

" I see what you mean."

There was a reflective pause.

" Guy."

" Yes ? "

" What exceptionally small hands you have."

He looked down. " I wasn't aware of it. Size, you know, is purely a matter of comparison."

" I suppose you're right."

" In this case I'm certain of it. And now I'd like to know why you're so dead keen about this pie business. I must confess I find it all rather mysterious."

" There's nothing mysterious about it. I need that hundred guineas. Desperately."

Her bitter tone made him glance at her curiously. " I should scarcely have guessed it, if I may say so. This delicious dress, and——"

" It's borrowed. Actually, I've hardly a rag to my back. But when Rose Cone invited me to her dance I just couldn't resist the chance of getting up to London for a decent night out for once. Buried as I am, from one year's end to the next, in the earthiest depths of East Anglia."

" Ah, I see ! I couldn't understand how it was that I hadn't met you before. Where exactly do you live ? "

" Down in Elmhshire. A place called Dodder-in-the-Bottom. I'm the parson's daughter."

" Then I've no doubt he gets excellent congregations. But aren't you rather wasting your time and talents in a place like that ? Why don't you come up here and strike out a bit ? I've a notion you'd very soon make yourself felt, and not only in the sphere of after-dinner entertainment."

" I can't leave the poor old Dad. You see, Mama died when I was born, and he couldn't possibly look after himself. The only things he knows about are

chess and magic-lanterns. Apart from that he just *floats*. And now, with this beastly Ramage type trying to turn the village against him, and drive him out of his parish, and accusing him of misappropriating the funds of the Simon Gumption charity——”

“ I say, this sounds pretty bad.”

A tear fell on his hand and he felt her trembling violently in his arms.

“ And then on top of it all there’s Julian.”

She broke off abruptly, turned, and once more buried her face in his neck. And this time there was no nonsense about it. She was settling in for a really good cry. Through the turmoil of sobs, gasps and snuffles, her voice came up faintly from the neighbourhood of his Adam’s-apple.

“ Oh, Guy . . . oh, Guy . . . I wish . . . I wish . . . I was dead . . . ”

A quarter of an hour later Nan was lying supine on the sofa cushions with a bottle of smelling-salts in one hand and a roaring pink gin in the other. Between sips and sniffs she cast affectionate glances at Guy who was sitting beside her in an armchair. He was looking very stern, his eyes narrowed, his teeth locked on his pipe-stem. From time to time he made quick pencil jottings in the notebook lying in his lap. Presently he put away the book and reached once more for the teapot stewing poisonously on the hob.

“ This situation,” he said quietly, “ needs looking into. I don’t like the smell of it all. The facts, as I understand them, are briefly these. On the one hand we have the Rev. Erasmus Tucket, a gentleman of mild and scholarly, if somewhat eccentric, disposition. On the other, Sir Walter Ramage, a singularly unattractive character of violent and domineering temperament. The latter, entirely unprovoked, has

launched a virulent campaign against the former. By bribery and other corrupt means, he is seeking to alienate the natives of Dodder-in-the-Bottom from their parish priest and to drive him from his benefice. In this he has met with considerable success. So much so that the village is at present split into two warring factions : the Rector, at the head of a handful of Old Faithfuls, fighting a gallant but, it is to be feared, losing battle against Sir Walter and his horde of bribed mercenaries."

Guy paused to blow a shower of ash and sparks out of his pipe, at the same time holding up his hand as Nan sought to interrupt him.

"Just a moment. I haven't finished yet. We now come to the second theme in our drama, which both greatly complicates the issue and inflames it still further. I mean the love-affair between the Rector's daughter, Nan, and the knight's son, Julian. That they are both passionately in love there can be no doubt. But owing to the bitter vendetta between their parents, their hopes of marriage are dim indeed—the Rector averring that if his daughter marries into *that* shower, he will instantly open his veins ; and Sir Walter averring that if his son marries into *that* shower he will expel him from the Ramage commercial empire and bloody well see to it that he never gets another job anywhere else."

Guy sat back and joined his finger-tips. "You consider that a fair summary of the situation ? "

Nan nodded, eyeing him a little ruefully. "Yes, that's fair enough, I suppose, but . . ."

"But what ? "

"Well, I do think you might be a bit more sympathetic about it. You sound just like . . . like a surgeon discussing an operation."

" More accurately, like a Negotiator discussing an operation."

She sat up with a jerk. "Guy! You don't mean . . ."

He nodded calmly. "Yes. With your permission, I propose to look into this situation at Dodder-in-the-Bottom, and without delay. It is clearly a matter which, in the jargon of my profession, needs 'arranging.' "

"But . . . but we could never afford your fees. I gather they're terrific."

He looked at her severely. "I know that it is always difficult to do two things at once, but if you had listened more carefully to my conversation with your hostess you would also have gathered that I never charge a fee to a clergyman of the Church of England."

She managed a hint of a blush, then leaned towards him impulsively. "I can't begin to tell you how grateful I am. But I just don't understand. It's quite beyond me."

"What is?"

"Why you should decide to come to the aid of people you know nothing about, and without any fee, when you must be so terribly busy with clients who are ready and eager to pay you the earth."

He bent down to knock out his pipe. "For three reasons. First, because I happen to be a country parson's son myself; and, though a godless pagan this many a year, I still have some loyalty to the cloth. Second, because you are the sweetest little darling I've ever dried the eyes and wiped the nose of. Third, because I am an incorrigible romantic, and of all the works of the Immortal Bard, Romeo and Juliet is my favourite."

He stood up. "By the way, there's just one important point I'd like to clear up at the outset.

Did the old Dad really misappropriate the funds of the Simon Gumption charity?"

"Of course not. I did. That's why I'm so keen to earn this hundred guineas and square the accounts before the auditor gets at them."

"I see. May I ask why you pinched the money?"

"Certainly. To pay my boy-friend's card debts. He will play for high stakes, and he can't cheat well enough."

"I only hope," said Guy softly, "that the boy-friend realises what a very fortunate young man he is."

He held out his hands. "And now, my pet, if you'll tell me where you're staying I'll get you a cab."

"Nowhere."

"I beg your pardon?"

"The Cones are full up, and I can't afford an hotel."

"Then may I enquire where you intend . . . ?"

She lay back against the cushions, linked her hands behind her head and gave him the lot. "Well, I was going to spend the night in the waiting-room at the station. I was."

An hour later Guy closed his bedside copy of *The Pilgrim's Progress*, yawned and reached for the light switch. As he did so his bedroom door opened softly.

"Oh, Guy . . . ?"

She was standing on the threshold smiling at him naively, her face rosily flushed, her hair a tumbled black halo. She was draped in a suit of his white silk pyjamas, the arms and legs rolled up roughly at the ends. She looked about ten years old.

"Well?" he enquired. "What seems to be the trouble? Headache? There's aspirin in the medicine cupboard in the bathroom."

She stepped into the room. "No. It's . . . Tweedledum and Tweedledee again."

"Indeed?"

"Yes, Guy. They're feeling a mite lonesome, and I thought perhaps . . ."

He threw back the covers and got out of bed. Taking her by the shoulders he turned her around and gently impelled her towards the doorway.

"Now run along and get kipped down, my love. And as for the Tweedle twins, just tell them to try counting sheep. Black ones with long frisky tails."

3

THE next day a grave complication developed in the affair of the affectionate banker and the young lady from Málaga. It now seemed that the original album of photographs was not the only record of the financier's holiday activities ; there was also in existence a home-ciné film covering the subject in even greater detail, in colour, and mostly in close-up.

Faced with this crisis, Guy reacted with characteristic verve. He doubled his expense-account, boarded the first available aeroplane, and within twenty-four hours had established himself as one of the most liberal and enthusiastic patrons of the sink of iniquity in the Calle de Siete Revueltas. There, in due course, his famous combination of charm, guile and ruthlessness brought about a settlement satisfactory to all parties.

This unexpected trip abroad badly disorganised his current business schedule, and it was not until some three weeks after his meeting with Nan that he was free to turn his attention to the problem of the Rev.

Erasmus Tucket of Dodder-in-the-Bottom. As soon as he was at liberty he sent off a telegram announcing his arrival on the first Saturday in July.

Guy's brilliant career as a Negotiator was based upon a judicious blend of boldness and caution. When congratulated upon some especially dazzling coup, he never failed to point out that his successes were largely due to a meticulous attention to detail and to pains-taking preparation in the early stages, a fact which many of his customers seemed unable to appreciate—until they got the bill.

In the Tucket case a cautious approach seemed particularly desirable, for, judging by Nan's account, the state of affairs at Dodder was both extremely complex and highly inflammable. Moreover, a degree of deception would be necessary, because if he appeared in Dodder in his usual style he would certainly be the centre of acute curiosity and suspicion.

After careful consideration he decided to present himself as the son of an old college friend of Mr. Tucket, who, disillusioned by the vanity of the worldly life, was placing himself in the hands of the Rector for a period of spiritual guidance with a view to taking Holy Orders. This, he felt, was a discreet and plausible role, and one which, by reason of his own clerical background, he would be able to carry off convincingly.

At eleven o'clock on the Saturday morning he taxied to Liverpool Street station and settled himself in a third-class compartment on the train for Elderbury, the nearest town to Dodder-in-the-Bottom. From there he would have to rely upon the local bus service to get him to his destination, a distance, according to the map, of some four or five miles.

He had hesitated to commit himself to these primitive

forms of transport, but his professional conscientiousness had prevailed as always. Clearly, his black Bristol would be grossly out of keeping with his present sober role, and so, reluctantly, he had left it in the garage. By the same token he was travelling third-class and had restricted his luggage to a single canvas grip, plus the massive golfing umbrella-cum-seatstick without which he never moved abroad.

The train he had chosen turned out to be an East coast holiday-special, and by departure time it was grievously overloaded. In his compartment the passengers were wedged in five a side, and he soon realised that he was in for a punishing journey.

On his left was an over-heated and under-corsetted mother of twins dedicated to a remorseless programme of nappy changing ; on his right a flirtatious chemical blonde who, in a dense miasma of cheap scent and body-odour, was savagely knitting a fancy pucc jumper, her near-side needle rattling against his ribs like a drum-stick. Opposite to him was an appalling male infant with a hypnotic squint, who divided his time between exploding balloons of bubble-gum in Guy's face and beating him over the knee-caps with a tin spade. In defence he tried to open his copy of *The Times*, but speedily desisted, for as soon as he sought to free his pinioned arms the twin-ridden mother speared him in the loin with a safety-pin, and the frolicsome blonde started rubbing her thigh against him. Finally he managed to light his pipe, and enveloping himself in an impenetrable smoke-screen he tried to forget his present discomforts by pondering upon the task that lay before him.

In spite of his years of experience he felt a keen sense of anticipation, for the Tucket case looked like being an interesting change from his usual type of job. His

normal field of operations was the glittering world of cosmopolitan high-life ; now, in turning his attention to the rustic ambience of Dodder, he was breaking entirely fresh ground. He looked forward to completely new kinds of problems calling for new techniques. And he looked forward equally to renewing acquaintance with Nan. Since she was his client, professional etiquette ruled out any serious frisking, but she would certainly be a pleasure to mix with on the bottom-tweaking level. And the Rector—the dear old Dad—might well turn out to be a fascinating character. His mood was further improved by the pleasant glow of self-esteem which he always enjoyed when giving his services gratis on purely humanitarian grounds.

As soon as the first luncheon was announced he prised himself out of his fetid niche and fought his way into the corridor, encouraged by a parting slash on the shin from the tin spade.

The safari to the third-class restaurant car was tedious and exhausting, and involved passing through the first-class one. Here Guy got bogged down at the end of a queue, and as he stood waiting he could not help envying the pampered ease of the sparsely scattered occupants. He was strongly tempted to pay the extra tariff and eat in comfort, but once again his professional conscience intervened. The luxuries of first-class travel were not in tune with his ascetic role of the intending candidate for Holy Orders.

Presently he became aware that he was being closely scrutinised from the flank. He eased himself around, glanced to his right-front, and liked it. He was a master of the lightning reconnaissance, and in his first traverse he took in every detail. Without an instant's hesitation he placed her in the very top

class, mentally labelling her—in the deliberately old-fashioned slang which he affected—a corker.

The copper hair swirled back from the forehead in a breaking wave. The hot emeralds of her eyes were set in sockets of an oriental slant. She had a creamy matt complexion, and her lips were of the kind which cannot hold even a casual cigarette without appearing to kiss it. Her frivolous little hat was a straw epigram ; her dark grey suit a flannel sonata. A blouse of the sheerest lawn clung like a drift of white smoke about the heavy fruits of her bosom. On the business-finger there was a thin gold wedding-ring and a thumping great emerald to match her eyes. She was somewhere in the late thirties, he judged, and almost certainly a foreigner, for she notably achieved what the English woman never can : the combination of polished worldly elegance with complete animal femininity.

The queue moved forward four paces and stopped again, bringing Guy alongside the table at which she was sitting alone. As he gave her another oblique glance she leaned across from her window-seat and tapped him on the arm.

" You may sit here if you wish. None of these places is occupied."

Guy's first reaction was one of satisfaction at his accurate diagnosis. There was indeed a faint trace of foreign accent, probably Scandinavian. His second was one of amusement at the perfect match between the tone of her voice and the lips from which it issued : it was the kind of voice which cannot help making even an invitation to sit down sound like an invitation to get into bed. His third reaction was his usual courtly bow.

" Many thanks, but I'm travelling third-class."

She raised her eyebrows. "Is that wise, in such warm weather? I'm sure you'd find it much more comfortable to eat in here."

"No doubt; but it just so happens that I can't afford it."

"I take that as a very cruel snub."

"But why?"

"Because you are clearly the type of young man who habitually travels first-class, whether he can afford it or not; and I conclude, therefore, that it is my company that fails to attract you."

"You are entirely mistaken, I assure you."

"Then if you really can't afford it, may I have the pleasure of entertaining you?"

Again Guy inclined from the hips, this time placing his hand on his heart. "I am more than grateful for your generous invitation, but I really feel I must decline. Third-class I am, and third-class I had better remain. Otherwise I may get ideas above my station. And now," he added, as the queue started to move on, "I must ask you to forgive me . . ."

She sighed, lay back in her seat and smiled ruefully. "Oh dear. How very disappointing. Such are the hazards of choosing one's travelling companions . . . how do you say it . . . at random."

Guy paused, half turned back and gave her the grin. "You have something there, dear lady. You speak truer than you know."

As he ate his meal he reflected upon the agreeable little incident, once more regretting that the call of duty forbade him to yield to his natural inclinations. She was a highly desirable property, ripe for development, and in other circumstances he would not have hesitated to invest a little time, cash and energy. He shrugged, ordered another cup of coffee and opened

his *Times*, turning first, in accordance with his present role, to the Saturday sermon.

When he returned along the train to his compartment there was no sign of the lady. And for the rest of the journey he stood in the corridor, feeling disinclined for further nappy-changing, thigh massage and laceration of his knec-caps. At two o'clock the train pulled into Elderbury station and, snatching his bag from the rack, he sprang out thankfully on to the platform—to catch a glimpse of burnished copper hair moving ahead of him towards the barrier.

Quickening his pace, he reached the station exit just in time to see her cross the road to the car-park and get into something very sleek and rakish. Craning his neck, he saw with some chagrin that it was a black Bristol.

4

WHEN Guy reached the combined bus-terminal and car-park in the middle of the town he found that he had nearly half an hour to wait for the next bus to Dodder-in-the-Bottom. He therefore settled down on his seatstick in a quiet corner by the waiting-rooms, lit his pipe and set about 'getting the feel of the locality,' a process to which he always attached the highest importance.

He was at once surprised and disappointed. It was many a long year since he had penetrated beyond the glossy enclaves of the Home Counties into the genuine hinterland, and he now realised that his notions of provincial life were sadly out of date. The guide-book

that he had consulted had described Elderbury as the centre of an agricultural area, and, accordingly, he had envisaged the typical country town of his childhood and adolescence : leisurely, rooted in the soil, its denizens divided up by a rigid system of class distinctions.

Total misconception. He might as well have been in some busy city suburb. The streets were choked with streams of glossy new cars. The skyline was a forest of television masts. The buildings opposite to him, fronting the town-green, included two super-cinemas, a dance-hall, three national chain-stores and a very stylish espresso coffee bar. As for class distinctions, it was plain that even here in remote Elmshire the post-war social revolution was complete. The week-end crowds thronging around him were marked by a uniform air of prosperity and self-assurance. There was an unrelieved panorama of well-cut suitings, expensive footwear and gay summer frocks in the most up-to-date fashion. Impossible to tell lawyer from tractor-driver, shop-girl from doctor's wife. All very right and proper, no doubt, he reflected, but just a trifle dull. And dull not only to the eye but to the ear as well ; for the local accent, he noticed, was thickly overlaid with the revolting standard mixture of B.B.C. English and cinema-American. Perhaps in the outlying districts like Dodder he would find some traces still of the more variegated country life of his youth ; but it seemed unlikely.

When the bus pulled in, it was very different from the homely vehicle he had expected, for it was a forty seater streamliner painted in flashy green and cream. Still bogged down in remembrance of things past, he was slow off the mark, and by the time he had clambered aboard every seat was taken. He was therefore

obliged to stand in the aisle where he found himself behind a highly developed little red-head in a jaunty sleeveless frock and stilt-heeled sandals.

As they moved off she gave him a frisky glance over her shoulder, at the same time firmly wedging her abundant buttocks against his nether parts. At this he edged discreetly backwards, only to recoil with a grunt of anguish as he was rowelled in the seat by the points of a pair of garden shears protruding from an adjacent shopping-basket. This reflex action returned him to even more intimate contact with the young lady's rotundities which were now animated by a demoralising rotary motion in the hula-hula style.

"I beg your pardon," he murmured. "I slipped."

"Granted soon as asked," she replied. "I don't mind ridin' matey if you don't."

"Quite so. In any case, we appear to have little choice in the matter."

Without breaking contact or ceasing for one instant her provoking activities, she turned her torso in profile and gave him a saucy grin.

"It's ever so 'ot, isn't it?"

"Uncommonly warm."

"But what I say is, it makes a nice change."

"Very true."

"After all the cold winds we've been 'avin' it's ever so nice to slip into a reely thin frock. It gives you quite a thrill."

"Indeed?"

"Well, you know what I mean. A girl likes to be able to show 'erself off a bit."

"No doubt."

"But you should 'ave 'card the way our Mam carried-on at me this mornin'. Somethin' alarmin' it was."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"'Topsy,' she says, 'Topsy, you ought to be ashamed of yourself you did, runnin' about like that. You'll 'ave all the fellers whistlin' after you in the street. An' if Major Gantree sees you, 'e'll chase you round the village green with flames pourin' out of 'is nostrils.'"

"Dear me!"

"'I don't know what you're comin' to,' she says. 'You look as if you 'aven't got a stitch on under that there frock, not a stitch.' An', of course, there was nothin' I could say to 'er."

"No?"

"Well, what *could* I 'ave said, secin' as 'ow she was dead right."

At this point their conversation was interrupted by a fat lady with a bushy grey moustache who diverted Topsy's attention with a question regarding the arrangements for a forthcoming whist-drive at Podder Inferior. In spite of this distraction the hula-hula activities continued unabated; but Guy was by now fully acclimatised and he looked about for fresh entertainment.

His glance fell upon two husky young men sitting in the seat immediately to his left, one of whom was nursing in his lap a magnificent high-power binocular. Snatches of their talk reached Guy's ears through the rumbling of the bus.

"What're you doin' this afternoon, Tom? Goin' cricketin'?"

"Not bloody likely, mate. I'm off ganderin'." He tapped the binocular on his knees. "I ain't bought this lot for nothin'. Thirty quid it cost me, second-and."

"Thirty quid! Muckin' 'ell!"

"Aye, but it's wuth it, mate, every penny on it. With this 'ere you'll get the lot, Jack boy. The perishin' lot, an' I don't mean may-be."

Jack picked up the glasses and fondled them enviously. "Well, I *'ad* thought of goin' to watch Podder Inferior an' Little Pittle in the Final of the 'Ospital Cup . . . but I reckon I'll come ganderin' instead. The weather looks like 'oldin' up, an' with this 'ere—"

"If you want to come you're welcome, mate. There's a lot more of the lads comin' along, an' I'm chargin' a bob-a-nob."

A sharp nudge in the ribs informed Guy that Topsy had finished with the bearded lady and was now eager to resume their interrupted conversation.

"Are you goin' far?"

"Only a few milcs, to Dodder-in-the-Bottom."

"Well, I never! That's where I live. Stayin' long? Or just passin' through?"

Guy divined that here was a good chance to put in some preliminary spade-work on his newly assumed role. A countryman born and bred, he well knew the speed and efficiency of the village bush-telegraph system. Whatever he told Topsy would certainly be common knowledge throughout Dodder within fifteen minutes of her quitting the bus.

"I'm visiting the Rector, who was an old college chum of my late father. I'm thinking of taking Holy Orders, and Mr. Tucket has kindly invited me to stay with him for a while so that I can have the benefit of his advice and guidance."

An immediate and remarkable change came over Topsy. After a moment's undisguised astonishment she abruptly terminated her caudal exercises, edged herself clear and demurely lowered her eyelids.

"Well, I never!" she murmured. "Who'd 'ave thought it!"

Then she sighed and shook her head. "I reckon you've only got 'cre just in time."

"Oh? Why do you say that?"

"Because it looks as if poor old Mr. Tucket won't be livin' in Dodder much longer. We're expectin' to 'ear any day that 'e's resigned. Sir Walter Ramage—'e's the big pot around these parts—as fair got 'is knife into the Rector, an' swears 'e won't rest until 'e's driven 'im out of the village. Now 'e's sayin' that Mr. Tucket 'as been fiddlin' the Church funds, an' that 'e'll 'ave 'im prosecuted an' sent to gaol."

Topsy snorted indignantly and stamped her foot. "If you ask me, it's a wicked shame, that's what it is! Mr. Tucket's a funny old chap, admitted, with 'is chess an' 'is magic-lantern an' all the rest of it. But 'e's a proper gentleman, all the same, an' speakin' personally, I wouldn't 'car a word said against 'im."

The bus slowed down and stopped at the mouth of a leafy lane.

"Well, 'ere we are," said Topsy. "You'll 'ave to walk down to the Rectory from 'cre."

They got out along with a dozen other assorted passengers, including the two youths with the binocular. Topsy halted by a stile set in the hedge.

"I go thataway," she said, and pointed across a lush pasturage to a thatched cottage nestling in the edge of a copse of beech trees. "That's where I live; me and our Mam an' me five sisters. If you're passin' by any time, don't 'esitate to drop in for a cup of tea. We shall be ever so pleased to see you, I'm sure."

"I shall be delighted to do so at the first opportunity," replied Guy warmly. "My name, by the way, is Random. Guy Random."

"And I'm Miss Turvey. Miss Topsy Turvey."

With a coy backward glance and a giggle of mock-embarrassment, she crossed the grass verge and addressed herself to the stile. Having achieved the top bar and total exposure, she paused to wave farewell.

"Cheerbye, Mr. Random ! Be seein' you . . ."

With another giggle and an elaborate pantomime of shocked surprise, she pulled down her skirts. "Oh, dear, talk about seein' the sights ! Whatever will you think of me ? An' you goin' to be a parson, too ! "

Then, with a final sputter of erotic titters, she lowered herself to the ground and minced away across the meadow, bouncing and juddering in all directions on her four-inch heels.

Guy picked up his bag and sauntered on between high thick hedges studded with massive clms and ashes. Half a mile ahead was a scatter of grey stone walls and red tile roofs dominated by a particularly fine early sixteenth-century church tower. It looked as if Dodder were a good deal bigger than he had expected, probably numbering not less than six hundred souls. Away on the far side of the village the ground rose up steeply in a long unbroken ridge topped by a fringe of wind-swept trees. A cosy site indeed, and rightly designated "in-the-Bottom."

His thoughts returned to his recent encounter with Miss Topsy Turvey. It seemed a happy omen. Mr. Tucket's position was clearly critical, but he was not without formidable supporters. If the Turvey tribe as a whole were endowed with Topsy's attack and perseverance they would be allies well worth enlisting—always providing their minds could be kept on the task in hand.

Presently the road made a sharp right-hand bend beside a spruce bungalow standing in a very pretty

garden. The name-plate on the gate bore the gallant legend 'El Alamein.' As Guy broke step to admire the roses he saw a tradesman's van approaching him, with a big grey car closing up rapidly on its tail. An instant later the car accelerated violently, swung out from behind the van and rushed head-on at Guy, who was obliged to leap for his life into a deep dry ditch at the roadside, whence he caught a fleeting glimpse of sharp flinty features locked in an arrogant scowl. Waist deep in a thicket of stinging-nettles he furiously shook his fist at the receding cloud of dust and loosed off a glittering torrent of invective lasting a solid fifteen seconds.

"Hear, hear, sir ! I heartily endorse that statement."

Guy revolved in his trench to face a neat military figure dressed in elegant tweeds, leaning over the bungalow gate. He was of the middle height, lean and dapper, with a beautiful tooth-brush moustache, thinning grey hair and a distiller's-delight complexion.

"The name is Gantree. Toby Gantree. No doubt you're feeling a mite parched after that burst of eloquence. I make no mention of jangled nerves. Pray step inside and join me in a snifter."

Guy scrambled out of his nettle-bed, gathered up his luggage and followed the Major up the garden path. "Many thanks, sir. Very civil of you. Guy Random at your service. And if I could once get my hands on that bull-headed bug——"

"Steady yourself !" begged the Major. "Your language is a real pleasure to listen to, but I'd rather you reserved it for out-of-doors. I don't want the old homestead to go up in flames about our ears."

He led on into a pleasant little den decorated with quantities of sporting silverware and military photographs. There he put Guy in a deep armchair and

equipped him with a nourishing tumbler of whisky. Sipping his drink, Guy looked around him with approval. It was clear from the mitres on his host's tie that he had been at the better of the only two possible schools, and from the crests on his trophies that he had adorned the crackest gunner regiment in the British Army: the Venerable Company of Bombardiers.

The Major lowered his first drink in two gulps and hastily poured himself another. "I must apologise for your rude welcome to Dodder-in-the-Bottom. God knows I've met some stinkers in my time, but that fellow beats the lot. Shocking ill-bred bounder. That performance with you out there just now was typical. Immensely rich, utterly ruthless, and tries to ride rough-shod over everybody. It's a thousand pities that he ever came into the place. One of these days I shall run out of patience and take a poke at the fellow for his insufferable insolence."

Guy murmured noncommittally. He was indeed jumping straight into the heart of the matter. Already, on the one hand, he had had a sharp brush with the enemy, whilst, on the other, he had contacted two potential allies. Things were shaping nicely.

When the Major heard that Guy had made the acquaintance of Miss Turvey he was highly delighted, declaring her 'a proper little spanker, and bung-ho to the brim with the old one-two.' Her five sisters were no less worthy of the attention of the connoisseur, and Our Mam herself was nothing short of 'a regular handful'—in every sense of the term.

He was even more delighted when he heard that Guy was staying at the Rectory. "Charming people, Random, really charming. Dear old Rasty Tucket is one of the very best type. A bit eccentric, of course,

but a gentleman to his finger-tips. And as for Nan, she's a perfect little pet. The sweetest nature imaginable ; and, my word, what a lovely set of luggage ! ” He paused to sketch a series of opulent curves with his disengaged hand. “ I must say I envy your being under the same roof with that little morsel. Staying long ? Long enough, that is ? ”

Guy outlined his situation, and the Major raised a quizzical eyebrow. “ Thinking of becoming a padre, eh ? Frankly I wouldn’t have guessed it if you’ll allow me to say so. However, jolly good luck to you ! No doubt you’ll make a great success of the job with that flow of eloquence.”

Having finished his drink, Guy made ready to move on. The Major after his double snorter was more genial than ever.

“ Well, my dear fellow, I hope I shall see something more of you during your stay in Dodder. Don’t hesitate to drop in for a spine-stiffener any time you’re passing. Pray convey my warmest regards to all at the Rectory. With things as they are . . . ”

He broke off and moved to the door. Guy guessed that he had been on the point of referring to the Rector’s persecution by Sir Walter Ramage, but had thought better of it. As they stepped into the tiny hall the telephone bell rang and the Major, with a word of apology, picked up the receiver.

“ Golf, old boy ? Sorry, quite out of the question. . . . I tell you I’m far too busy working on my new ganderstand. . . . Oh, yes, a first-class job, I assure you. Forty foot elevation and perfect visibility. . . . Looks like being a capital season, so naturally I’m mad keen to get the thing finished. . . . What ? Why yes, of course, I should be delighted to see you, and as many of your house-party as you like to bring. I

should warn you, by the way, that I'm charging a small fee. Just a nominal sum, of course, to cover the cost of timber etc. . . . Right ; I'll expect you all at three o'clock tomorrow afternoon. Farewell, and don't forget your glasses."

The Major led Guy out by a rear door and directed him onto a pathway leading across the paddock towards a thick belt of trees through which the gleam of water was discernible.

"Follow this track, my dear chap, and you can't go wrong. Save your trudging all the way round by the village street. Straight through the trees, bear right past the upper lake and you'll see the Rectory straight ahead of you."

Guy, always a stickler for correct form, hesitated. "You're quite sure it's all right ? I mean I don't want to go barging around and spoiling everybody's sport . . ."

The Major looked mystified.

"I mean this bird watching caper you all seem so keen on," said Guy. "This gandering, or whatever you call it. I take it the geese breed on the lakes ? "

"The geese ? Oh, yes, of course, to be sure. But don't worry. Just follow the track and you'll be quite in order."

Guy padded across the field towards the trees. When he gained their shade he paused to light his pipe, and his glance fell upon a tarpaulin-covered mound at the foot of a giant beech some twenty paces from the pathway. He crept off to investigate. Pulling back the waterproof sheet he disclosed a neat pile of sawn timber, a bag of carpenter's tools and a coiled-up rope ladder complete with grappling hooks. He raised his eyes and saw, high above his head, a solid wooden

platform cunningly constructed in a crotch of the massive branches. It was some six foot square and surrounded by a substantial guard-rail. At the interior edge, against the tree's trunk, a convenient bench was in process of erection.

Guy scrutinised the platform thoughtfully. Plainly he had lighted upon the Major's new ganderstand. And a very neat job it was, too, representing many hours of patient toil. But . . . but surely . . . he stepped back and circled the tree, carefully taking in the lie of the land. Then he grinned, shook his head and chuckled to himself. It was to be feared, alas, that the Major's career as a gunner had taught him lamentably little about zones of observation and the like. For one thing was abundantly obvious at a single glance: the new ganderstand was sited on the wrong side of the tree. Whilst offering a splendid view across the village, it had no view whatsoever of the lakes. He returned to the pathway, happily envisaging Toby Gantree's reactions when he finally made this unhappy discovery for himself.

Emerging from the trees, Guy saw the Rectory a quarter of a mile ahead of him, standing at the bottom of a long grassy slope. He stopped and surveyed it with the keenest pleasure, for it was a real beauty in the grand nineteenth-century tradition: a noble memorial to the days when country parsons enjoyed comfortable private incomes, laughed in the teeth of contraception, and kept a numerous staff of servants both inside and out.

The mansion—for such it was—consisted of a main oblong block from the ends of which two long parallel wings jutted backwards to enclose a vast cobbled courtyard. The roofs were of grey slate, and the walls were covered with a skin of mud-coloured pebble-dash

which had peeled away in great patches to reveal the red-brick beneath.

The grounds were on an equally grandiose scale. Fronting the house there was a square gravelled drive giving onto a lawn capable of accommodating three tennis-courts. An assortment of overgrown hedges and impenetrable shrubberies guarded the flanks, whilst in rear there was an extensive kitchen-garden surrounded by ramparts of mellow stone. The whole was heavily timbered, and Guy, a passionate tree-man, detected a particularly splendid copper beech and two fine acacias.

As he drew near he was struck by the profound atmosphere of peace and isolation which enfolded the place. At first he was at a loss to account for it, for the situation was not especially remote or concealed. Then he realised that he was faced by something almost unbelievable in 1955 : a completely wire-less house. On the whole huge bulk of Dodder Rectory there was neither television mast nor radio aerial ; neither telephone line nor, even, electric-light cable.

Again he paused, put down his bag and heaved a deep sigh. At last, it seemed, he had found what he had been looking for all his life : a place where a man could sit down in a chair, light his pipe and . . . *think*.

Having descended the slope, he climbed over a fence, crossed a narrow lane and reached the Rectory gate, a massive wooden five-barred affair entirely guiltless of paint. He depressed the rusty latch and pushed, without the slightest effect. For several moments he shoved and wrench'd diligently, but the barrier remained immovable. Finally, in a burst of irritation, he dropped his bag, placed his shoulder under one of the upper bars and heaved with all his strength. Suddenly there were two terrible rending cracks from

the bases of the posts, and the whole structure slowly toppled over onto the drive where it disintegrated into a heap of rot-riddled fragments.

"Why, Guy, darling, it's you ! I thought for one disturbing moment that the Day of Judgment was at hand."

Through the fog of powdered timber Guy descried Nan advancing at the double from the front door. He stepped forward sheepishly.

"I say, I'm most terribly sorry, I really am. But I only just sort of pushed the thing, and . . ."

Nan stared at him incredulously. "You mean you tried to *open* it ? "

"But of course. Why not ? "

"Because nobody's tried to open that gate for the past twenty years." She pointed to a ragged gap in the hedge, closed by a single sagging strand of barbed wire. "That's the proper way in. Or it used to be. But don't worry, my pet. As long as you're all right, nothing else matters. The thing was a regular eyesore, anyway, and now it'll make excellent kindling. We shan't even have to chop it up."

When they emerged from the cloud of dry-rot dust which still enveloped the ruins, Guy was struck by the severe, not to say stark, simplicity of Nan's outfit : a single-piece canary-yellow bathing-costume, sparingly designed and manifestly two sizes too small for her. Intercepting his glance, she fluttered her prodigious eye-lashes and made a number of adjustments at critical points, which merely resulted in transferring the deficit to other and even more critical points. After several moments' plucking and tugging, she shrugged and gave up the struggle.

"Ah well, I suppose it's no use trying to cram a quart into a pint pot, as the saying goes. In any case,

I only wear the thing when I help Cecil to cut the tennis-court."

She nodded towards an immensely powerful and bestial looking youth straddled over an antique mowing-machine in the middle of the vast stretch of shaggy turf. Lost in a mindless trance of dedicated ferocity, he was subjecting the complex mass of rusty mechanism to a hail of blows from a seven-pound hammer.

"Just making a few running-repairs," explained Nan. "The poor old thing's about done for, I'm afraid, but Dad says we can't afford a new one."

"It must be terribly hard work," said Guy. "No wonder you strip off for the job."

"On the contrary. I strip off so that it *won't* be hard work. I'm a strong believer in providing incentives to speed-up production. I simply jam myself into this pudding-bag, harness myself to the front with that length of rope and canter smartly hither and yon, whilst Cecil shoves in rear. And, what with one incentive and the next, he doesn't loiter. In fact half the time he's damn-nigh slicing rashers off my bottom." She paused to rub a polychromatic bruise. "I sometimes think he must be short-sighted."

At this point Cecil ceased his onslaught on the mowing-machine and shambled towards them. He was dressed in a sweat-soaked cotton vest, dung-encrusted corduroys and a very fancy pair of pointed shoes with crocodile insertions in the uppers. To permit respiration through his thicket of tonsils and adenoids, his mouth was permanently agape, so that the lower jaw appeared to be irremediably dislocated. His skull was covered with a wiry straw-coloured pelt which sprouted downward and forward over the negligible forehead in a matted fringe, like the peak of

a Guardsman's cap. In consequence of this obstruction he was obliged to walk with his head cricked back at an agonising angle, in order to see where he was going. Addressing himself to Nan, he jerked a horny thumb at Guy.

" 'Oo be muckin' offcoomdun ? " he enquired.

" This is Mr. Random, Cecil. Mr. Guy Random, the eminent negotiator."

" Yer mean 'im as stuffs bare wimmin in poies ? Well, I never ! Pleased ter meet yer, mate."

He eyed Guy with a blend of awed respect and carnal friskiness, at the same time offering a huge calloused hand. Guy responded, taking good care to get the first grip, but even so he emerged from the exchange of courtesies feeling as if his right hand had lately been at variance with the rollers of a steel-strip mill.

" You can put the mower away," said Nan. " I shan't have time to help you with the grass now. And don't forget it's bath night tonight. We shall need the kitchen fire lighted in good time."

Cecil nodded. " Be seein' yer, Mester Random. You'll 'ave ter drop in at pub one o' these noights an' sup a foo quarts wi' the lads. They'll fair piddle theirsens when they 'ear as 'ow we got a muckin' offcoomdun what stuffs bare wimmin . . . "

" All right, Cecil, that'll do," said Nan. " You just run along and get that fire lighted. Mr. Random will discuss his culinary activities with you some other time."

She watched him fondly as he shambled away. " He's rather a pet, isn't he ? We've had him ever since he left school. He does all the odd jobs about the place and never seems to mind when he doesn't get his wages. I don't know what we should do without him."

"He may be a pet," replied Guy coldly, "but I don't see why he had to call me rude names."

"How so? I didn't hear any."

"On two occasions he distinctly referred to me as—I quote—a muckin' offcoomdun. The precise meaning of the term escapes me, but to the ear of the practised linguist the mere sound of it carries over-tones in the highest degree offensive."

At this, Nan laughed so immoderately that her bathing-costume all but turned into a cummerbund. "It simply means a stranger; an off-come'd-one; one who has come from off, or away. If you're going to sparkle as a conversationalist around these parts, you'll have to re-tune your linguist's ear and brush-up your vocabulary. . . . And now, welcome to Dodder parsonage! I'm sure you're more than ready for a wash and a cup of tea."

They crossed the drive on a succulent carpet of weeds, and approached the front door which was sheltered by a lofty porch with a flat roof surrounded by a parapet. Nan pointed to a bedroom window immediately above.

"That's my room, with easy access to the porch roof, as you can see. Very convenient for a variety of activities ranging from sun-bathing to guerilla warfare."

"Warfare? Against whom?"

"Oh, various pesky nuisances. Only yesterday afternoon I took the opportunity to drop a lighted cigarette over the edge onto the brand-new Homburg hat of our Rural Dean who'd been chivvying Dad about some ridiculous questionnaire which he'd very sensibly torn up for pipe-lighters. The tiresome fellow was smouldering a fair treat when he finally drove away; and I hear that total conflagration occurred in the middle of Elderbury High Street—with the

result that our Rural Dean is shortly to be prosecuted in the local Court of Summary Jurisdiction for trying to drive his car through the revolving-door of the Public Library. That'll larn 'im to pester the Tuckets with bumph ! ”

Inside the porch Guy was surprised to see a stout wooden ramp, flanked by bales of straw, leading up to the door-step. He checked an impulse to enquire the purpose of this contrivance, and followed Nan across the threshold.

He found himself in a dank stone-floored hall illuminated by a single window masked by a dense curtain of ivy. When his eyes had adjusted to the gloom he saw that no less than six separate doors opened off this sepulchral cavern in the middle of which stood an oval dining-table still littered with the ruins of a cold luncheon.

“ We have to eat in here nowadays,” said Nan. “ The dining-room ceiling fell down last week, and it’s such a bore having to fish lath and plaster out of your soup all the time.”

“ It’ll be a bit draughty in winter, won’t it, with all these doors ? ” suggested Guy. “ But perhaps you seal most of them off.”

“ Good gracious, no ! We need a steady gale blowing through this hall to keep the rest of the house warm.”

“ I beg your pardon ? ”

Nan indicated a huge coke-stove projecting from the wall. “ My own idea : a primitive but highly efficient form of central heating. From October to May we keep that brute permanently white-hot. The prevailing winds funnel through the porch, whistle through the gaps in the front doorway and are warmed-up in here by this ravening Moloch ; after which they percolate

through all these doors to the outlying parts of the mansion. The wise man doesn't try to oppose the forces of nature ; he harnesses them and diverts them to useful purposes."

"A very neat scheme. But your fuel bills must be pretty fierce, I imagine."

"Luckily we have our own fuel supply. The local ironstone quarries have an engine-depot up on the ridge behind the village, and twice a week I stroll up there for a smoke and a chat with the night-watchman —whilst Cecil nips round the back to the coal-dump with a wheel-barrow. The stuff seems to suit this stove very well, if you keep it permanently on full draught."

As they crossed the hall, Guy's attention was attracted by a rusty and mud-bespattered tricycle parked in the corner by the hat-rack. He paused to examine it, for he saw at a glance that the vehicle was distinguished by a number of unusual modifications.

Affixed to the handlebars was a neat wooden structure resembling the music-stand on a piano ; and, clamped alongside it, in place of the customary bell, there was an old-fashioned motor-car bulb-horn. From the hand-grips there depended a loop of stout cord, the slack portion hitched over the peak of the saddle in the style of a horse's reins. But these novel accessories were quite eclipsed by the main feature in rear. This was a ramshackle iron luggage-grid attached to the back axle by a complicated system of bolts, brackets and cross-braces ; and lashed onto it, with a cocoon of tarred rope, was a pile of heavy metal cylinders some four feet in length and six inches in diameter.

Nan, who had gone ahead, retraced her steps to where Guy was crouching spellbound on his heels,

avidly examining the whole machine from stem to stern.

"Ah, I see you've spotted Dad's trike. Tricky little job, isn't it? You wait till you see him in the saddle. He's a proper tiger when he gets his blood up. In fact I'm dead certain he'll break his neck one of these days, whizzing up and down that ramp in the porch. He was extremely annoyed when I erected those straw safety-fences, but after his crash last January I insisted on taking precautions."

"A crash? I say, bad luck! Did he hurt himself?"

"Yes, he did. He'd had a row with the Archdeacon at a meeting in Elderbury, and came pedalling home in a perfect fury. I heard him hooting as he came up the lane, and got the front door open in good time. But as he swung into the porch at full chat, he hit an ice-patch, slid into an uncontrollable three-wheel drift, bounced off the ramp, overturned and split his head open on the boot-scaper."

Guy nodded sympathetically. "Of course you're bound to come to grief sooner or later if you try racing tricks on a touring model. And with all these gadgets . . ."

"Quite so. But they all serve a useful purpose. You see, with that little desk on the handlebars, he can study his chess problems or work on his sermons as he pedals along. And when peevish motorists hoot at him to get out of the way, he just blasts back at them with the old bulb-horn. The reins, of course, are for when you have to push the thing up hills, on foot. Shoving by the handlebars is awkward, as you keep barking your shins on the pedals. So Dad gets right round at the back where he has room to use his strength, applying the thrust on the saddle-pillar whilst steering with these reins hooked over his thumbs."

"Very ingenious," said Guy. "And it certainly looks as if he needs room to use his strength. What in heaven's name are these torpedo-like objects on the luggage-grid?"

"Those are cylinders of acetylene gas for fuelling his magic-lantern. He trikes all over the county, summer and winter alike, giving lantern lectures on missionary endeavour in swcatiest Africa. He's in tremendous demand."

"Indeed? You surprise me. I should have thought that in these days of cinema, radio and television, the attractions of magic-lantern lectures were a thing of the past."

"You wait until you've seen one of Dad's—then you *will* be surprised. . . . And now, if you've quite finished gloating over Bucephalus, I'll show you your room."

They entered an almost pitch-dark passage from which arose the main stairway. For a house of such dimensions it was unexpectedly steep and narrow, and began its ascent with a particularly treacherous left-hand jink which caused the treads to taper off sharply just at the point where a secure foothold was needed to start the climb. Guy, taking off with a brisk spring, placed his forward foot on empty space and fell flat on his face. In trying to break his fall, he clutched at the banisters, only to hear once again the pistol-crack of rotten timber as two of the uprights tore out at the roots and clattered down onto the passage floor.

"So sorry," said Nan. "I should have warned you about that corner. The Bishop of Elderbury broke a collar-bone at this very spot only last week. We'd given him stewed damsons for luncheon and he was in a bit of a hurry."

They plodded up to the first landing where the main stairway suddenly whipped around in a hairpin bend

towards the front bedrooms. A subsidiary flight of steps branched off to the right, and mounting this they reached a cul-de-sac containing two doors. Guy did a quick mental orientation, and concluded that his lodgings were situate in the South wing.

"Here we are," said Nan. "Bedroom on the left, dressing-room on the right. I think you'll find everything you need. The bedstead's a bit jangly, I'm afraid ; in fact that's why we've moved it into the bachelor suite. But the mattress is comfortable enough if you find the right hole for your hip. I'm sorry there's no hot water just now, but there'll be plenty later on when Cecil's got the boiler rifting. Meanwhile you'll have to make-do with a cold rinse. . . . And now I'll run along and get a brew going whilst you unpack. You'll find the meal in the kitchen : sharp right at the foot of the stairs, bear left by the fire-extinguisher at the end of the passage, and keep marching."

Left alone, Guy dumped his luggage on the commodious brass bedstead—which instantly responded with a startling clatter of loose ironmongery—and surveyed his room. It was twenty feet square, fourteen feet high, and provided with two windows, one of which looked down into the cobbled courtyard. The other afforded a pleasant view of a secluded side-lawn, bordered by riotous flower-beds, and an overgrown hayfield sloping away to a row of towering elms.

The faded floral wall-paper was blotched with damp-stains and, in several places, had peeled away from the plaster in sagging bulges. The ceiling was even more dilapidated, the damp-stains in this case overlapping into a continuous whole pocked with spots of green mould. There was a particularly threatening area immediately above the bed, which probably accounted for the bulky umbrella hanging from the head-rail.

The furniture was scanty : a rickety bamboo night-table, a marble-topped wash-stand, a colossal mahogany wardrobe and a single wooden armchair. This last, flanking the bed, attracted Guy's attention by reason of its noble proportions and its handsome seat beautifully decorated with petit-point embroidery. It was, indeed, a throne rather than a chair ; lordly, even princely, in style, yet unmistakably ecclesiastical—a perch, in short, for a pontiff.

Guy sat down in it and viewed his image in the wardrobe looking-glass with quiet satisfaction. He had often fancied himself in the role of the exalted prelate, guardian of the sacred mysteries and master of state intrigue—and now, arranging his features in an expression of paternal benevolence mingled with inscrutable reserve, he raised his hand, with first and second fingers crossed, and went through the motions of blessing an imaginary host of grovelling pilgrims.

Simultaneously he became aware of a curious instability in the seat, and dismounted to examine it. To his surprise he now saw that it was hinged at its backward edge, and, cautiously raising it, he disclosed an under-seat pierced by an oval orifice above a deep white chamber-pot. A pair of little doors, with elaborate brass knobs, sited between the front legs, permitted the insertion and extraction of the utensil.

He sat on the bed and scrutinised his discovery with intense satisfaction. He had heard of this highly civilised type of domestic comfort, but had never before been fortunate enough to encounter one. He determined to make the fullest possible use of it, and to secure a photograph of it to provoke the envy of his metropolitan friends. He would be able to dine out on this for the next six months.

5

HAVING unpacked his meagre luggage, Guy stripped to the waist and made ready to wash. He was feeling uncommonly taggy after his cruel journey, and he approached the monumental wash-stand with mounting symptoms of *angst*. A 'cold rinse' was hardly adequate to his present needs; nor was he encouraged by the half-pound slab of kitchen-soap provided for his ablutions. But when he emptied the chipped ewer into the cracked basin he was agreeably surprised. The water was so soft that it felt almost like oil, and it was tempered by the caressive warmth of direct sunlight.

He plunged his head into the basin and set to work with enthusiasm—excessive, as it turned out, for the mild and tepid rainwater combined with the crude soap to produce instantaneously a turgid foam of clinging lather. Taken unawares, he got a proper faceful, and passed the next thirty seconds scudding round the bedroom in bitter anguish as he tried to knuckle the stinging suds out of his eye-sockets.

He resumed with more caution, and after prolonged splashing and brisk towelling came up feeling greatly refreshed. The domestic amenities of Dodder parsonage were primitive indeed, but undeniably effective. It was simply a matter of getting adjusted.

He hung his sober grey suiting in the wardrobe which already contained a battered pith-helmet, a splintered croquet mallet, a mouse-trap still baited with a bearded lump of cheese, and a concupiscent black lace brassière with the shoulder-straps torn out at the roots. Then he got into what he termed his 'battle-dress': silk shirt

and neckerchief, putty-coloured corduroy trousers, loose sweater, and a particularly caddish pair of desert boots.

He padded downstairs, carefully skirting the bishop-trap at the bottom, and set out for the kitchen. The dark passage, which proved to be some twenty yards in length, was traversed without mishap—apart from his stepping on the head of a broom projecting into the fairway, the handle of which pivoted upwards and rapped him smartly in the teeth.

He emerged into another stone-floored hall corresponding to, but slightly smaller than, the one at the front of the house. And here again he was faced by a baffling complex of doors in all directions; also a second staircase, even more treacherous in design than the first. Remembering his instructions, he turned sharp left by the fire-extinguisher and, guided by a murmur of voices, made for the most distant door which was standing ajar.

Nan, now wearing black matador breeches and a white shirt, was perched on a stool at the kitchen table, pouring a vicious brown brew from an enormous enamel teapot into exquisite Rockingham cups.

"There you are at last! And what a ducky you look in your corduroys and your little suede brothel-creepers. Come and be introduced."

She led him up to a bulky female figure, in a black poplin dress and starched white apron, overflowing a cane armchair.

"This is Mrs. Musk, commonly known as Matty, short for Matilda. She's been with us ever since I was a baby, and what we should do without her I break into cold sweats at the thought of."

Mrs. Musk arose and gravely inclined her head. "Welcome to Dodder parsonage, Mr. Random. I trust that your visit will prove both enjoyable and

fruitful. I assure you that I shall do all in my power to make you comfortable."

Guy, agreeably impressed by this courteous reception, bowed and murmured a few well-chosen phrases. Mrs. Musk was clearly a personality to be reckoned with. She spoke with exaggerated correctness in a low prim monotone ; and her appearance was no less dignified. Tall, big-boned, nobly erect, she was furnished with unbridled cornucopian breasts and majestically swelling buttocks. Her black hair was parted in the middle and severely drawn back from her large lard-white face with its discreetly pursed lips and lowered eyelids.

The introductions over, they sat down to tea, and it was at once evident that the Tucket household took its eating seriously. The brew was of the finest Orange Pekoe ; and the selection of fodder, including four distinct kinds of luscious cake, was overwhelming.

Guy, whose normal intake, at this time of day, was a single cup of Lapsang Souchong with a squeeze of lemon, and a sliver of cinnamon toast, was speedily surfeited. But Nan and Mrs. Musk set on in capital style. The former kept up a brisk flow of chat, but since she habitually crammed her mouth so full that she was obliged to speak through a shower of crumbs, her remarks were largely unintelligible. The latter pursued a silent policy, champing away with the remorseless persistence of a concrete-mixer, pausing only from time to time for a polite yet resounding expulsion of wind.

Thus temporarily unemployed, Guy glanced around the kitchen which was obviously the seat of a wide variety of activities other than culinary. The floor was of the inevitable stone flags, strewn with tattered strips of rag-rugging and coconut-matting, every one a potential leg-breaker. The ceiling, its original

whitewash overlaid by a thick crust of soot, was studded with rusty meat hooks.

On one side there was an enormous dresser loaded with chipped crockery and assorted culinary equipment including a brutal mincing-machine and coffee-grinder, both secured to the woodwork by vice-style clamps. On the other side there was a long wall-table stacked with greasy dishes, a pile of soiled under-clothing, a sewing-machine with a half-finished night-dress in it, an antique typewriter buried in a drift of tea-stained MS paper, and a two-gallon drum of arsenical weed-killer with a bowl of rotten bananas on top. The exterior wall was pierced by a big square window, looking down into the courtyard, its sill choc-a-bloc with an astonishing selection of oil-lamps of all shapes and sizes and in every degree of disrepair.

But the most impressive feature, by far, was an iron cooking-range so stunning in its sheer bulk of metal that it seemed, at first glance, as if a Centurion tank had somehow embedded itself in the rear wall. In the centrally placed fire-grate a veritable holocaust was raging : nigh-on a hundredweight of white-hot coals, Guy calculated, topped by a roaring sheet of yellow flame which poured up the chimney under a bell-shaped draught-hood equipped with ponderous side-flaps.

At various levels, all over the façade, a dozen or more flue-control slides, all pulled back to full throttle, stuck out like organ stops. The central third of the whole structure was already suffused by the sullen glow of molten iron ; and from the boiler on the right-hand side there emerged appalling dyspeptic eructations, indicative of a considerable body of water generating a dangerous head of steam.

Nan noticed his absorption and shook her head.

"I can see that you're impressed by our somewhat aboriginal way of life. Everybody else in the village has electricity, mains water, telephones and all the rest. But Dad won't have any part of it, maintaining that the life of peace and reason is only possible in the total absence of all modern conveniences."

"There's a lot of truth in that," said Guy. "As soon as I arrived I felt a remarkable sense of tranquillity and relaxation."

"You wouldn't feel so relaxed," replied Nan bitterly, "if you had to clean twenty oil-lamps every day and strangulate your hernia with that instrument of doom out there."

She pointed through the window into the courtyard where Cecil was operating a diabolical pump clamped to the house wall. The solid iron handle was a good six feet long, there was a full half-inch play in all the joints, and the two-foot leaden spout projected over a stone trough like a prehistoric sarcophagus. The task was obviously taxing even Cecil's formidable powers to the very limit.

"The well is fifty yards away, at the bottom of the meadow," explained Nan, "and it takes two hundred strokes to dredge the water up before you get a drop out of the spout . . . ah, here it comes now."

A crystalline stream gushed from the orifice, and Cecil filled up the three buckets standing in the trough. Then he stopped to screw a heavy metal cap over the end of the spout.

"That bung," said Nan, "diverts the flow up to the W.C. tank on the roof: another forty feet of vertical lift. I always help the lad with this part of the job, for fear he ruptures a blood vessel. You have a chat with Matty until I've finished. Then we'll go into the garden and have a natter."

Refusing Guy's offer of assistance, she got up and went into the courtyard where she stationed herself on the opposite side of the pump to Cecil and aided him in his work by dragging at the handle on the down-stroke with a length of rope.

Mrs. Musk shook her head and sighed. "A sad state of affairs, Mr. Random. My heart bleeds for that poor child. Being cooped up in a place like this, year in and year out, is no sort of life for any young woman; especially for a hot-blooded youngster, like Nan, in the full flush of her feelings—if you take my meaning."

"Quite so."

"I know what I was at that age: running around like I don't know what, until I thought I should burst. In fact I tremble to think what would have happened if I hadn't met Mr. Musk in the nick of time. . . . What Nan needs is a husband, as I keep telling her. It's no use going against Nature, Mr. Random. If a girl can't find an outlet for her natural humours she'll very soon lose her looks and her health, and like as not turn queer in the head."

Guy nodded towards the court-yard. "There seems to be little cause for worry as yet. I see no signs, so far, of loss of health and looks; nor of sprouting neuroses either."

"That's true enough, Mr. Random. In fact, I sometimes wonder . . . but in any case there's no substitute for marriage, that's what I say. I've always been a strong believer in the beneficial effects of regular habits—and it's never too early to form them."

"There's a great deal in what you say."

Mrs. Musk leaned towards him confidentially. "And that's why I was so greatly relieved when I heard that you were coming down here. . . . No, no, Mr. Random! Don't misunderstand me. I know

what a stickler you are for correct professional relationships with your clients, and very rightly so . . .”

“ You seem to be well informed about me, Mrs. Musk.”

“ Oh, yes, I am. It so happens that my youngest sister, Prudence, is lady’s-maid to one of your greatest admirers: Mrs. Crest.”

“ What a pleasant coincidence.”

“ Isn’t it? And, from what Prudence tells me, I’m satisfied that if anybody can arrange matters down here, it’s you.”

“ I shall do my best. But Sir Walter Ramage is clearly a pretty tough customer.”

“ Agreed. And, unless I’m much mistaken, you’ll find Mr. Tucket a good deal tougher.”

“ But I thought . . .”

“ Let me make myself clear, Mr. Random. You’ve got a double job on here. First, you’ve got to put Sir Walter in his place and compel him to let Julian marry Nan. . . .”

“ Precisely.”

“ But that’s only half of it. You’ve also got to persuade Mr. Tucket to let Nan marry Julian. And I’ve a notion that you’re going to find that a great deal more difficult.”

“ Surely you exaggerate?”

“ Not at all. It’s the difference between the two men that you’re up against, Mr. Random. Sir Walter despises Mr. Tucket on practical grounds, because he’s poverty-stricken and eccentric. But Mr. Tucket despises Sir Walter on grounds of principle, because he uses fish-knives and calls the drawing-room the lounge. Well, as we know, you can always make a practical man change his mind by showing him that he’s got to—or else! But the only way to make a man

of principle change his mind is to part his hair with an axe."

Guy looked at her with renewed respect. "A notably pithy digest of the problem that lies before us, Mrs. Musk. I can see that you are indeed a keen student of human nature ; and I venture to hope that you will allow me to call upon you for assistance and advice, as and when I may need it."

"Most certainly, Mr. Random. You can rely upon me to do anything that lies within my power for the welfare of my little Nan. Believe me, I shan't rest until I've got her safely wedded and bedded."

Somewhat later Guy was reclining in the shade of the superb dark copper—almost purple—beech which occupied one corner of the main lawn. Beside him Nan lay supine in a wicker chaise-longue, her hands linked behind her head.

"And now," she said, "we can settle down to a nice long chat. I can't tell you how relieved I was to get your telegram on Thursday, because I was beginning to fear that you'd forgotten all about me. I telephoned you after the pie assignment, but your man said you'd gone abroad."

"Yes, I had to whip off to Málaga for a week on behalf of a client ; but everything's straightened out now, and I am entirely at your service—for the next ten days if necessary. How did the pie affair go off, by the way ? "

"I had a most delightful evening, thank you. Tom Brown was ever so sweet to me ; and his guests were all perfect pets, especially Sir Roland Gander, the Industrial Relations expert, and Piers Gaveston, the eminent trades-unionist. There was also a most sympathetic Field Marshal ; and an absolutely ravishing old frisk with cavalry type hoop-legs and a

smile to boil the marrow in your bones. I didn't catch his name, unfortunately. Ambrose something, I think."

" You undoubtedly refer," said Guy, " to Mr. Ambrose Bannister, late of the Blues, distinguished patron of the Arts, and doyen of indestructible town-rakes. He *would* be there, of course. Did you have a chat with him ? "

" Not so much as I'd have liked, because he was extremely busy—being obviously determined, as the saying goes, to have *his* finger in *every* pie."

" I can well believe it. Anyhow, I'm glad you had a pleasant evening. I trust Tom Brown paid you the hundred guineas all right ? "

" Certainly. In cash and on the nail. Plus five guineas bonus for walking round the table on my hands—a little parlour trick of mine which seemed to be greatly appreciated."

" Splendid. That fixes your most pressing problem, anyway. Now that you've made up the deficit in the Simon Gumption Charity Fund . . ."

" That's just the trouble. I haven't."

" Oh ? I thought that was the purpose of the hundred guineas."

" It was ; but I had to use it for something else."

" Indeed ? "

" Yes. You see, when I got back here with the cash, I found that Julian had been losing heavily at poker again—so I had to give him my earnings to pay his debts with again."

" I see."

She looked at him anxiously. " You're not cross with me, Guy, are you ? I do feel as if I'd rather let you down, but what else could I do ? "

He smiled and patted her hand. " Of course I'm not cross with you. A gentleman's gambling debts

take precedence over all others. All the same, i would be just as well to get that charity fund squared up as soon as possible, because it puts us in a very vulnerable position. And before your boy-friend play; any more poker he'd better take a few lessons from me. After that he might start winning for a change.'

He watched her fondly as she settled back on the cushions and lit a cigarette. To be cross with Nantucket was surely an utter impossibility for any man normally endowed with what Mrs. Musk so aptly termed 'feelings.' For, in addition to her other manifold charms, she possessed the most devastating of all feminine allurements—intense natural sexiness. She seemed to exude it quite unconsciously, he reflected, like a—like a freesia flower giving off its luscious clotted scent: a completely natural, un-willed process, and, for that very reason, far more provoking than the most calculated sex-projection.

She caught his glance and gave him the little-girl smile which never failed to melt his heart, well-nigh ossified though it was by the years of negotiation.

"Well? You appear to have something on your mind."

He told her, and she nodded thoughtfully. "A freesia flower. I rather like that. Much more flattering, anyway, than Toby Gantree's definition."

"Oh? And what might that be?"

"Bung-ho to the brim with the old one-two."

She sat up briskly. "But we mustn't waste your valuable time gossiping. No doubt you'd like to get down to business as soon as possible. . . ."

"Tranquillise yourself," replied Guy. "There's no hurry. First things first is the Random motto. I've not even begun to consider my plans yet—apart from the purely personal matter of my status as a putative candidate for Holy Orders."

Nan was entranced with the role he had chosen for himself. "A very sound scheme ; and I'm sure that Dad will be delighted to undertake your spiritual guidance. I'll brief Mrs. Musk and Cecil, and instruct them to spread the story round the village."

"That's the idea," agreed Guy. "I'm all for careful preparation of the ground in the early stages. It always repays a hundredfold later on. And the next thing is a thorough appreciation of the existing situation in all its aspects. Before I can plan my campaign I must have all the information available : an accurate estimate of our own forces and of those of the enemy ; a sound diagnosis of the prevailing state of morale on both sides ; a reliable summary of the outstanding characteristics of the enemy's strategy and tactics . . . and so on and so forth."

Nan looked at him wide-eyed. "I begin to understand what Maggy Cone meant when she said that you demanded only two things of your clients : patience and an open cheque-book."

Guy shrugged. "I have always been content to base myself upon the three guiding principles of that great soldier Field-Marshal Viscount Montgomery of Alamein, under whose command it was once my privilege to serve. One, painstaking preparation. Two, the co-option of God. And three—socko !"

"Well, you can't say fairer than that," admitted Nan. "But I shall have to leave it to Dad to paint the big picture for you. I'm afraid I'm concentrating on Julian and me."

"And very understandable too. I look forward to making his acquaintance at the earliest opportunity. . . . God Almighty ! What was that ? "

He sprang to his feet, bitterly rubbing the back of his right hand. Simultaneously Nan dived off her lounge

chair and snatched up a small white spherical object from the grass. It turned out to be a steel ball-bearing, the size of a marble, wrapped in paper.

"From Julian!" she cried, smoothing the paper out on her knee. "I wonder what . . . Ooooh. . . ."

Guy started forward in alarm as she vented a long swooning gasp, pressed her hands ecstatically to the Tweedle twins and heeled over on the cushions.

"Steady!" he urged. "Take it easy. Not bad news, I hope?"

She slowly emerged from her seizure and thrust the twist of paper into his hands. "Look! Read what it says! He's coming to see me . . . tonight!"

Guy applied himself to the cramped handwriting: 'Life of my soul, The B.O.T. is going to Scotland on the night train. Expect me about one a.m. J. P.S. I love you so much I could burst.'

"Isn't it wonderful?" she breathed. "He's coming tonight . . . Ooooh. . . ."

Seeing that she was on the brink of another catalepsy, Guy shook her firmly by the shoulder, thrust a cigarette between her lips, and poured her a roaring pink gin from the array of bottles on the adjacent garden-table. When she was once more in touch with reality he resumed his seat and lit his pipe.

"I'm sorry if I seem a little dense, but there are some aspects of the situation which elude me. In the first place, who is the B.O.T.?"

"Sir Walter, of course. That's what we always call him: the Bloody Old Tyrant."

"I see. And why this fanciful method of communication? Not only fanciful but, I may add, damned dangerous as well. My right hand is bruised to the bone."

"It's perfectly simple," said Nan with a touch of peevishness. "Last week the B.O.T. finally blew his

crater and absolutely forbade Julian ever to see me again, or even speak to me. Well, you know how it is in a village. If he did try to see me, some bastard would instantly report the fact, and then Julian would be kicked out of the firm and have to go right away and try to get a job somewhere else. In fact, he'd probably have to emigrate. So now we have to keep in touch by catapult. Julian stops his car at the end of the lane, on his way home from work, and pretends he's having a bash at the rooks. Then he slings a crafty one in this direction, with a little love letter wrapped round it . . . ”

She paused to draw breath and leaned towards him, her eyes shining her open lips aquiver. “ Isn't it ever so romantic ? ”

“ It is indeed,” agreed Guy. “ And what surprises me is that the odious Sir Walter should have such an engaging son.”

“ Ah, Julian takes after his mother. He has a photograph of her that he keeps locked up secretly in his desk. She must have been a raging beauty. And what temperament ! ”

“ You mean his mother's dead ? ”

“ No, no. She's alive all right—somewhere. You see, after two years of Sir Walter's company she ran out of enthusiasm and away, and has never been heard of since. But every year, on his birthday, Julian gets a thumping great bunch of Parma violets. No message, no address, just the flowers forwarded through a London florist. . . . ” Again she leaned towards him, enraptured. “ *And do you know what ?* ”

“ No. What ? ”

“ In the photograph, his mother is wearing a thumping great bunch of violets in her corsage ! Isn't it ever so—— ”

"Romantic? I suppose it is. But I can't help feeling that it's all rather hard on Julian. Running away and leaving an infant son. . . ."

"Well, as a matter of fact, I rather agree with you. And I once said as much to Julian. But he won't have it at all, maintaining that this annual violet caper is—I quote—a grand romantic gesture such as excuses, nay, justifies, the foulest infamy!"

Guy thoughtfully tapped out his pipe. "The more I hear of Julian the more I like him. He is clearly that very rare phenomenon: a truly civilised man."

"You wouldn't think so if you encountered him in the boot-cupboard with a quart of Tiger Milk in his bloodstream . . . I shall never be the same again—I'm happy to say."

She finished her gin and stood up. "Well, now you know what the form is so far as Julian and I are concerned. For the general parochial situation, as I said before, you'll have to apply to Dad." She glanced at her watch. "Six o'clock. I don't know what's keeping him; but since he's so late, he's probably over in the graveyard working on tomorrow's sermons. He says he finds the atmosphere conducive to clear thinking. . . . Perhaps you'd like to stroll over there when you've finished your drink and see if you can find him."

"Certainly. It will give me an opportunity for a little preliminary reconnaissance."

"Good. And now I must dash along and help Matty to get dinner ready. And, whilst I think of it, I'll get hold of Cecil before he goes off duty and brief him about your theological student role. He's not such a ninny as he looks; in fact, by the time he's finished with the story, the village will be firmly convinced that you're the Archbishop of Canterbury."

6

IN due course Guy set out for the graveyard, padding down the winding Rectory lane between lofty hedge-rows under a dense green roof of elm and chestnut foliage. After a quarter of a mile he emerged from this bosky tunnel to find himself on the edge of the village proper.

Dodder-in-the-Bottom, it seemed, was roughly circular in shape. There was no recognisable main artery or village street. Instead, the dwellings were scattered along four curved stretches of roadway which linked up to form an irregular ring enclosing a spacious central green. The church stood well back behind a thick screen of trees, and Guy decided to defer his visit until he had made a quick round-tour.

As he sauntered along he noticed with disapproval the manifold symptoms of rural ruin. Television masts sprouted from every chimney-stack ; a complex web of electricity cables and telephone lines stretched above the pathways ; and outside every single gate some kind of motor vehicle was parked. The very gardens themselves were signs of the times. In the old days they would have been rampant jungles of vegetables and currant bushes relieved by occasional naïve little flower patches ; now they were all neat lawns and concrete paths and formal beds. But worst of all was the impetigo of raw new houses erupting in all directions amongst the original dwellings. Spick and span and briskly prosperous, these were clearly the lairs of the invaders from the local town whom Toby Gantree had so bitterly denounced.

' . . . up till the war, my dear Random, Dodder was a civilised English village, complete with earth closets, contaminated wells and a forelock-tweaking peasantry wholesomely employed in tilling the soil and content with the simple pleasures of whist and fornication. Now the place is nothing but a suburb of Elderbury. All kinds of nasty common people have forced their way in, turning everything arse-over-tip. Why, I can remember the time when any Dodder doxy would see eye-to-eye with a chap for five bob, and no questions asked. Now they demand five quid and every precaution. . . . '

But all was not lost yet, reflected Guy, as he strolled on past several groups of villagers gossiping at their garden gates. The natives of Dodder might be urbanised in some respects, but they obviously still retained the passionate inquisitiveness and animal suspicion of the true country man. There was still that avid scrutiny and *sotto voce* exchange of comment at the approach of a stranger ; still that sudden silence and turning of the backs as one got within speaking range ; still that sense of gimlet stares boring into one's back as one passed by and moved away. And, in spite of all the modern amenities, the pathways of Dodder were still lavishly fouled by cow-pats. These nostalgic remnants of the old order afforded Guy such intense satisfaction that he was only mildly vexed when he found himself entrenched to the Achilles tendons in a particularly luscious sample, pungent, ductile and gently steaming.

Having roughly de-dunged himself on the grass verge, he continued his circuit, crossing the road to examine an arresting poster affixed to the notice-board outside the village hall. It proved to be the announcement of a forthcoming magic-lantern lecture

by the Rector under the title *Rhapsody in Black*. A subsidiary paragraph of fancy-tickling prose advised the public on no account to miss this fascinating revelation of native Fertility Rituals and Initiation Ceremonies in the Heart of the Dark Continent. Guy was no little impressed. Mr. Tucket's lectures were, it seemed, on a high intellectual level. And judging by the considerable size of the village hall, Nan had not exaggerated the drawing-power of her father's discourses.

A little farther on he came to the combined post office and general store, and he took the opportunity to send the news of his safe arrival to his friend Mrs. Crest who had been so greatly perturbed by his railway journey into the provinces that she had insisted upon giving him a little identification locket to hang around his neck, and a stamped-addressed card for immediate dispatch to herself on the successful completion of his safari.

It was now nearly seven o'clock and he stepped out briskly in the direction of the church. As he finished the last segment of his circuit he had another pleasant surprise in the shape of a genuine village pond. This was the last thing he had expected in a tarted-up place like Dodder, and he was at a loss to understand how it had escaped the general process of urbanisation. True, it was only a small one ; but it was splendidly foul and fetid, fenced off from the roadway by just the right type of rotten wooden railings.

Moreover, it was now fulfilling one of the basic functions of a village pond, viz. a summer evening rallying point for the local youth of both sexes. A sizable mixed group was gathered under the over-hanging chestnut trees, guffawing and giggling in an agreeable fever of sexual titillation. There was a

heartening panorama of powerful torsos draped in flashy sports jackets ; of perky buttocks crammed into skin-tight slacks ; of swelling bosoms agog beneath filmy blouses.

As Guy drew alongside he noticed that several of the young men had binocular cases slung over their shoulders, and that one of them, indeed, was proudly exhibiting a hefty telescope. He, on closer examination, turned out to be Cecil, scarcely recognisable in a neat blue serge suit, his clotted fringe now combed up vertically like the crest of some exotic bird. Looking up, he greeted Guy with a lecherous grin which speedily changed into a sanctimonious simper.

“Evenin’, yer reverence !” he observed.

This brilliant stroke of propaganda delighted Guy, who instantly responded to the cue. Pausing in his stride, he turned towards the group by the pond, raised his right hand and gravely inclined his head.

“*Pax vobiscum !* And an agreeable evening’s gandering to you all !”

He pressed on, leaving in his wake a stupefied silence ; a silence which persisted until he had turned off the road towards the church, when it was terminated by a hysterical whinny of female merriment.

Having passed through the lych-gate, Guy stopped to appreciate the architecture of the church and to admire once again the noble proportions of the tower. Then he strolled slowly up the main pathway towards the south door. The graveyard—or God’s Acre, as he always preferred to call it—was a peaceful spot this hot summer evening. The closely packed headstones, mellowed by moss and lichen, and leaning every which way, were half-buried in a profuse crop of sweetly smelling hay. Here and there ancient yew trees spread pools of black shadow in the dazzling

sunlight ; and the crumbling boundary walls, overhung by giant elms, were masked by thickets of wild roses, honeysuckle, elder-bushes and stinging nettles.

He was glancing around for a sign of the Rector when his attention was attracted by a particularly impressive tombstone clearly of great antiquity ; and being something of a connoisseur of funerary inscriptions, he diverged from the path in hopes of finding another gem to add to his collection.

He was squatting on his heels in the hay, trying to decipher the faint traces of carved script, when he heard the clank of an iron latch and the thud of a heavy door closing. He peered around the edge of the tombstone and looked towards the church porch, expecting to see Mr. Tucket emerge. For a few moments nothing happened. Then, as he started to get up, he saw a figure standing in the shadowy dimness of the porch, scanning furtively from side to side. Was it an intruder of some sort ? A sacrilegious crackpot, perhaps, bent on desecration ? Or a petty thief after the contents of the poor-box ? He sank back again on his heels and watched intently through the waving fronds of hay.

Presently a man stepped out of the porch, swung sharply to the left and walked quickly towards an iron gate; set in the boundary wall, which gave onto what appeared to be a stretch of private parkland. He moved with his head lowered, his right hand pressed to a suspicious looking bulge under his jacket.

Somebody making off with the church plate ! As the notion flashed through his mind Guy once more rose to his feet, preparing to take-off in pursuit. But again he checked, for as his quarry bent down to tug at the gate handle, the skirts of his coat parted to reveal nothing more incriminating than a binocular case

suspended from his right shoulder. At the same time he turned in profile, and thercupon Guy's suspicion was replaced by a surge of anger, for the sharp hard features above the short stocky body were only too familiar—from his previous glimpse of them, three hours ago, from the nettle filled ditch outside Toby Gantree's bungalow.

His immediate impulse was to grapple with Sir Walter there and then, and expound his views on the knight's disgusting driving manners ; but the caution of the expert negotiator instantly intervened. To open fire on the enemy at this early stage would be a gross tactical blunder, serving only to betray one's own position and put him on his guard. The time to settle personal scores would come all in due course.

Sir Walter passed through the gate into the park, and Guy was still wrestling with his emotions when he became aware of a curious sound in the stillness of the graveyard. It was the sound of a flute : of a flute being played with both virtuosity and feeling. He straightened up and cocked an ear. The music—elegiac and meditative in mood—appeared to be coming from somewhere on the other side of the church. Guy, his curiosity piqued, retraced his steps to the pathway and made his way around the base of the tower to the north side. And there, as Nan had predicted, he discovered the Rector of Dodder-in-the-Bottom.

Mr. Tucket was reclining in a hammock slung between two sycamore trees in a natural arbour of wild-rose briar, ivy and honeysuckle. He was a singular sight indeed. Tall, burly, ruddy of complexion, he wore a battered pith helmet, a pair of dilapidated cricket boots, and ancient grey flannel trousers secured about the ankles by brown buckskin

shooting gaiters. His torso was naked save for his clerical collar, the black silk stock of which depended over his hairy chest. Pipes, tobacco and writing materials lay on an orange-box at his right hand ; from a tuft of hay on his left protruded the slender necks of a couple of hock bottles.

Guy halted in astonishment, for Mr. Tucket was so entirely different from what he had imagined. He had envisaged a frail, ascetic, brow-beaten creature, with one foot in the grave as like as not. Instead, he was faced with this hale and hearty giant relaxing at ease amongst his creature comforts.

But, even as he watched, a change came over Mr. Tucket. He lowered his flute from his lips ; a sombre cloud overspread his features ; he shook his head and heaved a profound sigh. Guy suddenly felt embarrassed, as if he were intruding upon some private grief, and he hastened to make his presence known. Venting a formal cough, he advanced through the hay.

"Good evening, sir ! Guy Random at your service."

Mr. Tucket looked up, heaved himself out of the hammock in a violent muscular convulsion and warmly pressed Guy's hand.

"Welcome, dear boy ! Welcome indeed ! Allow me to persuade you to a glass of wine. You'll find it sufficiently chilled, I think. I always keep a few bottles immersed in the font."

They settled down, Mr. Tucket resuming his place in the hammock and Guy sitting akimbo on the ground.

"Nan told me that I might find you here, sir ; so I took the liberty of walking over."

"Yes, I spend a great deal of my time in this sequestered nook during the summer months. I find the atmosphere of the graveyard at once soothing and chastening. Surrounded by these visible reminders

of the brevity of life and the vanity of all worldly endeavour, I am the better able to support the manifold burdens heaped upon me, and to endure the rigours and vexations of my calling in a true spirit of Christian fortitude and resignation. We do well, Mr. Random, to contemplate our latter ends."

"Very true, sir. And talking of vexations, I trust I'm not interrupting you at your sermons. Because, if so . . ."

"Not at all, dear lad, not at all. As a matter of fact, I've been diverting myself this afternoon with the composition of my epitaph—yes, Random, my own epitaph. As I said just now, we do well to contemplate our latter ends ; and I, for one, do not intend to be caught with my breeches down—or should I say up? You might like to hear what I've written. I am dealing at this point with my activities as a tricyclist and magic-lantern lecturer."

Mr. Tucket picked a sheet of paper off the orange-box, cleared his throat and sonorously declaimed :

"' No more shall Tucket ride
Through the countryside
Astide
His tricycle
Midst snow and icicle.
No more through summer's heat
Shall Tucket's eager feet
Treadle
The reluctant Pedal,
Conveying to the Heathen, far and wide,
The Magic Box, th' Illuminated Slide.' "

He put aside the paper and nodded with quiet satisfaction. "Just a rough draft, of course, which still needs a deal of polishing. But there's a certain elegance there, I feel ; a certain sinewy grace, if I may say so. Pungent, pithy, and not unharmonious."

lertainly," agreed Guy. "I particularly like the
e on tricycle and icicle ; also the Popian flavour
. reluctant Pedal and th' Illuminated Slide. . . .
irely, sir, it's scarcely time yet to be thinking of
ohs."

hysically speaking, probably not, since I have
ust turned seventy, which, in the Tucket family,
tomarily regarded as early middle-age. But in
ways, Random, I must confess that my thoughts
days veer gravewards with a certain regularity.
er that Nan has told you something of my present
ion. It is not exactly calculated to fill a man
the joie de vivre."

recisely, sir. An intolerable state of affairs. But I've
ed some pretty tricky situations in my time, and
l be greatly surprised if I can't manage this one."

Tucket shook his head. "Believe me, Mr.
om, I am more grateful to you than I can say
ur kindness in coming down here to espouse my
But I must tell you, in all fairness, that I
you are wasting your valuable time. The
ition is powerful and ruthless, and daily becomes
strongly entrenched. I fear that I am fighting a
battle."

Come, come, sir ! The battle hasn't even begun
And before it does, I shall need all the information
an give me. Now, first things first. Who and
exactly, is Sir Walter Ramage ? "

hat is easily answered. Having made a vast
ie out of the plastics industry, he bought the local
here, a year ago, when the old Squire died. In
cter he is a barbarian : completely merciless,
mlessly vulgar and savagely domineering. He
he never tires of reminding us, a man of the
e who has been through the mill—"

"And come out self-raising flour," suggested Guy.
"I know the type perfectly. They constitute, perhaps, the soundest argument in favour of the old style hereditary ruling class."

"Exactly, Random. As I always say : if I must be bullied by somebody, then I prefer to be bullied by a gentleman, who will do it in a spirit of pure self-interest, devoid of any personal animus. . . . But to return to Sir Walter. From the moment he came into the place we were at loggerheads."

"How so ? "

"It was inevitable. He is the kind of man who must have a finger in every pie and boss everything and everybody he comes into contact with. As a country parson's son yourself, you know what village people are ; how they fawn like spaniels around the man with the money-bags, no matter what his character may be. Well, in next to no time he was elected onto the Church Council and made People's Warden—whereupon he immediately began dictating to me how I should conduct the services and run the affairs of the church generally. Naturally, I resisted, courteously at first, then violently. Finally, I was obliged to recommend him—in my daughter Nan's phrase—to go-and-get-stuffed."

"Well done ! "

"From that moment he has been determined to crush me by every means at his disposal, his plan being to make things so intolerable for me here that I shall be obliged to resign my benefice and clear out."

"And I gather that he's already created a fair degree of havoc."

"Too true. The basis of his campaign is sheer barefaced bribery—crude, but undeniably effective

with the average villager who, as you well know, will lend his support to any villainy for an appropriate consideration. He began by undermining me on my own ground, in my capacity as priest. In six months he has stripped me of my sexton, my organist, my organ-blower, my Sunday-school teacher, three-quarters of my choir and the bulk of my congregation. In fact, the only people who now attend my services are Nan, Cecil, Toby Gantree, who is Rector's Warden, and the seven Turvey women, of whom I shall have more to say later."

Guy whistled softly. "Pretty fierce, and no mistake about it."

"Quite. And having done all this, he is now getting at the Bishop to press me to resign on the grounds that I am idle, inefficient and detested by my parishioners. Moreover, he has just launched a fresh attack upon me: a three-pronged attack aimed at my personal character. And this, I must confess, disturbs me, for it could be really damaging."

Mr. Tucket paused to drain his glass and smartly replenish it.

"Go on," said Guy quietly. "I'm listening. What are these three prongs?"

"First, the Turvey family—a widow and her six daughters who occupy the Rectory cottage over by Tickle-Fancy Spinney."

"A curious name, that."

"A very apt one, however, in view of all the facts. But to proceed. Sir Walter, like so many of his kind, has a nasty prurient puritanical side to his character. And he is now taking the line that the Turveys' social activities are a public scandal; that the Rectory cottage is nothing better than a public knocking-shop; and that I, in refusing to evict the Turveys, am

condoning flagrant immorality and profiting from the earnings of women."

"Good gracious me ! The charges are completely groundless, of course ?"

Mr. Tucket raised a bristling eyebrow and pursed his lips. "Well, Random, I must confess that I wouldn't go so far as to claim that. But, after all, who are we to set ourselves up in judgment on the hobbies of our neighbours ? When all's said and done, it's only nature, as the saying goes—and some are more natural than others."

"A very sane viewpoint, if I may say so, sir. And the second prong ?"

"That comes still nearer home, I fear. Not content with impugning my conduct as a landlord, Sir Walter is now blackening my reputation as a lecturer. Briefly, he declares that my magic-lantern displays are a serious threat to public morals ; that they are calculated to corrupt the minds of our local young people ; and that my unique collection of slides, dealing with native life in tropical parts, should be confiscated, and myself proceeded against for the publication of obscene libels. I understand that only last week he was urging the Parish Council to press the matter with the local police superintendent and the Archdeacon of Elderbury."

Guy nodded slowly. "Sir Walter, I apprehend, is nothing if not thorough. And the third prong ?"

Mr. Tucket sat perfectly still for several moments. Then a profound sigh escaped his lips and his chin sank upon his chest.

"The third prong ! You may well ask, Random. It is the Simon Gumption Charity Fund. And, to be perfectly frank with you, in this case Sir Walter has properly got me by the short hairs. The situation

is in the highest degree dangerous, and I shall be lucky to avoid complete disaster."

Guy felt that it was prudent not to disclose his knowledge of the *affaire Gumption*, and so he remained silent, merely raising his eyebrows in enquiry.

"The facts are simple," said Mr. Tucket. "The fund, of which I, as Rector, am sole administrator, yields an annual income of some one hundred and fifty pounds which is divided amongst the widows and fatherless of the parish. Paying-out day is June the thirtieth. On June the twenty-ninth I drew the money from the bank in Elderbury and secreted it overnight, as is my wont, in a cocoa tin in the kitchen dresser. The next morning I found that one hundred pounds was missing; nor have I been able to discover any trace of it since. I have managed to defer the pay-out on various pretexts, but now I have reached the end of my tether. Sir Walter has got hold of the matter and has taken it to the Bishop. I have now received their ultimatum. I must produce the money by today week—or else!"

"I say! But surely you can do something——"

"If you are suggesting that I should replace the money from my own resources, Random, then I can only advise you to think again. If you can name me any country parson who has ten pounds, never mind a hundred, at his disposal, I shall be astonished to hear of it. There is only one thing I can do, and I am doing it. I am staking all on my magic-lantern. In a final effort to make good the deficiency, I am putting on an extra-special lecture in the village Hall on Wednesday evening, featuring some exceptionally rare slides, dealing with native customs in the depths of the Congo, which I have never before exhibited. If the public respond as I hope, and I get a full house, there's

a fair chance that I may be able to raise the necessary sum."

" You mean you're going to put the thing on a commercial basis and charge for admission ? "

" Good gracious, no, my boy. That would expose me to entertainment tax and all the rest of the nonsense. My lectures are always strictly charitable affairs, with a voluntary collection for some deserving cause, usually some branch of missionary endeavour. I subtract my own expenses, of course."

" Of course."

" And they're apt to be pretty high."

" Quite so."

" In fact, my magic-lantern yields a very welcome addition to my meagre income. I look to it for all those little necessities which make life tolerable. Wine, cigars, new books and so forth."

" I see. But it's a bit chancy, isn't it ? I mean, you're entirely dependent upon the generosity of your audience. Even if you do get a full house for your lecture on Wednesday, will the collection yield a hundred pounds ? It's a fair sum, you know."

" If it doesn't, there won't be a lecture."

" I beg your pardon ? I'm afraid I don't quite follow you."

" Just a matter of elementary tactics, dear boy. I early discovered that the size of a collection depends upon intelligent timing. When I began I was a proper green-horn and left it until the end. In which case, as you suggest, I had to rely on my public's generosity. It disappointed me. Now I prefer to rely on their curiosity."

" Yes ? "

" Yes. I now take up the collection after the first ten minutes. And if it doesn't amount to a suitable

sum, I intimate that I am unwilling to proceed until it does. I find the system extremely successful, especially if one breaks off half-way through an unusually instructive slide."

"A very sound principle," said Guy. "And I sincerely hope that it proves effective on Wednesday night."

"And so do I, Random. Because if it doesn't . . ." Mr. Tucket threw out his hands and shrugged eloquently. Under his veneer of stoic calm he was clearly a badly worried man.

Presently he relit his pipe and looked sombrely across at Guy. "Well, there you have it. I've outlined my general situation for you, and I think you'll agree it's a pretty kettle of fish. Nor is that all. There is still one more noggin to be added to the bitter draught I have to swallow."

"Indeed?"

"Yes. I refer to my daughter's infatuation for Julian Ramage. Believe it or not, Mr. Random, that is the sorry—nay, the fantastic—truth. In spite of all that I have told you, Nan is amorously obsessed with my enemy's son and heir. Nothing, she avers, will turn her from her purpose of marrying him at the first opportunity, and producing—I quote—six more weeny Julians just as fast as I can whip 'em out from under. Do you wonder, Mr. Random, that my thoughts from time to time veer gravewards, not only with equanimity but with positive zest?"

Guy folded his arms on his chest and smiled cheerfully. "A very interesting state of affairs, Mr. Tucket. Very interesting indeed. Your eloquent summary of the situation has been most helpful. I can now proceed with the broad planning of my strategy."

His tone of quiet confidence penetrated Mr. Tucket's

gloomy preoccupation, and he looked up incredulously. " You really think, Mr. Random, that something can be done ? "

" You can rest assured," replied Guy curtly, " that something *will* be done, and smartish. So far, it appears, Sir Walter has been doing all the doing. It's high time that our side had a turn. In fact, sir, the time is clearly ripe for a forceful and well-judged counter-attack. As the Great Man said before Alamein : ' Stop digging those trenches ; you won't need them.' In the same sense I say to you, Mr. Tucket, ' Stop writing that epitaph ; you won't need it.' "

They were interrupted by the sound of hurried footsteps rounding the west end of the church, and a moment later Miss Topsy Turvey came bounding through the tombstones at full gallop. She was a pretty sight in a pair of skin-tight, black-and-white mottled trousers, and a white silk waistcoat-type suntop which was neither here nor there. Panting heavily, she cast herself upon the turf where she eagerly accepted a glass of wine with one hand whilst, with the other, she absent-mindedly stuffed back, beneath the wisp of *crépe de Chine* from which it had escaped, a large, white, raspberry-tipped breast. She tossed down her drink in two gulps and fixed Mr. Tucket with a melodramatic stare.

" They done it on you, Mr. Tucket, sir ! That's what they done : they done it on you ! "

The Rector regarded her anxiously. " What has been done upon me, Topsy, and by whom ? "

" The village 'all Committee, sir. They been and gone and cancelled your lecture."

" What ! "

" It's right, sir ! I saw it on the notice-board

outside the 'all just now, so I belted split-arse up 'ere straightaway to tell you."

There was a sombre pause. Then Guy rose briskly to his feet.

"H'm, h'm. Things seem to be warming up a fair treat. I suggest, sir, that we go down to the village Hall immediately and see exactly what they have done on you."

A couple of minutes later the Rector, Guy and Topsy were speeding past the pond towards the village Hall. Mr. Tucket set such a spanking pace that Guy, to keep up with him, was obliged to break into a periodical canter ; whilst Topsy, who had to stop every few paces to repackage her bust, proceeded in a series of sharp sprints.

As they pressed on they passed by several groups of natives who either deliberately turned away to avoid acknowledging the Rector, or returned his greeting with sly grins. At the same time Guy caught snatches of muttered comment. ' . . . fancy 'im bein' seen with 'er . . . brazen little 'ussy . . . 'e ought to be ashamed of 'imself, 'e did . . . showin' all she's got, like that. . . .'

He glanced at his companions to see how they were reacting to these observations which must surely be as audible to them as they were to himself. Mr. Tucket was staring icily ahead, his jaw set, his brows locked in an angry frown. Topsy, on the other hand, was clearly highly delighted, and returned Guy's glance with a hearty wink.

"Jealous of me knick-knacks, that's what it is," she declared. "What wouldn't them skinny old boilin'-fowls just give for a pair like these 'ere ! "

Followed by the battery of gimlet stars, they halted at the village Hall and looked up at the notice-board.

Topsy had been only too right. Plastered across Mr. Tucket's poster announcing his lecture was a strip of white paper bearing the crudely lettered statement : *Cancelled. By order of the Committee.* (*Signed*) *T. Tingle, Hon. Sec.*

The Rector turned slowly to Guy and shrugged resignedly. "Well, Random, that appears to be that. Ramage's work, obviously. He's got at the Committee and persuaded them to squeeze me out. So much for my lecture. I've had it."

But as he started to move away, his shoulders bowed, Guy took him firmly by the arm.

"Nothing of the sort, Mr. Tucket. Don't talk nonsense. This is just the kind of clear-cut issue we need to spring that counter-attack I was talking about. You *will* give your lecture. I'll see to that. And if they won't let you give it here, then we'll have it somewhere else. And, what's more, it's going to be the most successful lecture you've ever given."

Mr. Tucket halted and peered into Guy's face. "My word, Random ! You really mean——"

"I really mean," said Guy grimly, "that I'm just about bunged to the incisors with Sir Walter Ramage and all his little tricks . . . and that it's high time I began *arranging matters* around these parts."

"That's the sort of talk I like to 'ear," declared Topsy, making yet another pectoral adjustment. "And now, if you'll excuse me, I must be off. Major Gantree's going to show me 'is stamp-collection at seven o'clock ; and it's a wonderful big one, I understand. Cheery-bye ! "

7

WHEN they got back to the Rectory the table in the hall was laid for dinner, and savoury smells were seeping through from the back regions. Mr. Tucket went off to the cellar, declaring that the occasion called for a couple of bottles of his best Burgundy, and Guy went up to wash.

He was making a reconnaissance on the first landing, seeking where he might satisfy his immediate needs, when Nan came down the stairs from her room. She was wearing a charming little sleeveless frock of coffee-coloured linen and smelt deliciously of overheated skin liberally sprayed with *Larmes de Vénus*.

"From your glassy stare and shuffling gait," she observed, "I divine that you're looking for Alf's."

"I beg your pardon?"

"King Alfred and his perishing hot-dogs, ducky. It's always been my theory that he let the pesky things burn because he was unavoidably detained by the forces of nature. Thus we see how the entire course of a nation's history may hinge upon an attack of diarrhoea. A sobering thought."

"It is indeed."

She nodded towards a door on the bend of the stairs. "It's in there. You'll find it's really very comfortable. An agreeable view and quite a good library."

"Thank you."

"I ought to warn you, however, that it's never available in the mornings between ten a.m. and one p.m., because Dad always settles in to read his *Times* and think out his sermons, it being his firm conviction

that more Great Thoughts have been born in the privy than in the study."

"I see."

"But in case of crisis there's alternative accommodation in Cecil's studio behind the south wing."

"Cecil's studio?"

"So called by reason of the drawings on the walls. They're well worth a careful inspection, exhibiting, as they do, a notable fertility of fancy combined with a stark simplicity of technique, the whole based upon twenty-five years' unremitting anatomical research. The place is quite a museum piece : a genuine two-seater E.C., charmingly situated in a natural bower of lilacs, honeysuckle and clematis. See you later."

Guy passed through the indicated doorway and was highly delighted. Here was no cramped cubby-hole with meagre pedestal seat and wretched loop-hole window. He found himself, instead, in a commodious chamber illuminated by a generous casement affording a fine view of the surrounding countryside.

The throne was in the form of a handsome mahogany bench extending across the whole width of the apartment ; and the pan was no less remarkable. Unusually capacious, it was no mere commonplace affair of plain white porcelain, but was decorated all over in the authentic Spode-blue Willow Pattern. Here, Guy realised, was another unique gem of domestic furniture of which he must obtain a photographic record before returning to London.

An abundance of reading matter was housed in a neat glass-fronted bookcase conveniently within reach of the right hand when *in situ*. The choice was catholic, including Greek and Roman classics, the whole of Proust, some ponderous tomes on Oriental theology, and a much-thumbed Monster Fun Book full of rude stories.

But the best was yet to come, as Guy discovered when in due course he applied himself to the flushing device—a stout stirrup-type hand-grip countersunk in the top of the bench. Laying hold with both hands, he rose on his toes and heaved the handle upwards, thereby extracting a three-foot length of brass rod three-quarters of an inch in diameter. This operation, accompanied throughout by a dire clanking of rusted couplings, culminated in the simultaneous opening of a miniature trapdoor at the bottom of the pan and of a concealed inlet orifice at the top, whence there reluctantly seeped forth a pitifully inadequate trickle of dirty green water.

For several seconds Guy contemplated the pathetic rivulet, deeply puzzled, for the pipe going up through the ceiling was at least two inches in diameter, and the feed, presumably, was by direct gravity from the tank on the roof which Nan and Cecil had so laboriously replenished at tea-time. In view of these facts, the flow ought surely to be something better than this.

Then, as if to confirm his theory, there was an alarming gurgling convulsion in the feed-pipe and a veritable torrent gushed forth, a torrent laden with a mass of flotsam and jetsam which he identified as the sodden ruins of a starling's nest.

He was watching this Niagara with intense satisfaction when, as suddenly as it had started, it checked, diminished and abruptly dried up. Nor could repeated violent agitation of the brass rod induce it to resume. Clearly the plumbing at Dodder Rectory was fraught with a multitude of hazards both natural and unnatural.

When he reached his room he found himself faced by a member of the household whom he had not yet met. Coiled up on his white silk pyjamas on the

counterpane was a magnificent marmalade tom-cat, a truly noble creature in the full flush of manhood. Guy, who was a great cat fancier, noted with admiration the immaculate white stockings and waistcoat ; the close ginger-and-white stripage of the powerful body and sumptuous tail ; the splendid spread of whisker, the battle-scarred ears, the haughty stare of the glowing amber eyes. A neat leather collar encircled the creature's neck, and Guy leaned over to read the brass name-plate : Byron Tucket, the Rectory, Dodder-in-the-Bottom.

Knowing that nothing offends a cat so much as undue familiarity, he restricted his greeting to a courteous bow and a brief observation on the warmth of the weather, after which he proceeded with his toilet. Presently he felt a butting and rubbing against his right shin, and glanced down. Byron was surveying him with a sleepy, speculative stare, back slightly arched, tail erect and bent over sideways at the tip. Plainly the time had arrived for a little well-bred conversation, and Guy ventured a few inquiries as to general health, current hunting prospects and sex-life. These were well received and answered by a soft yet eloquent mewing.

By the time the dinner gong sounded a state of deep mutual esteem had been established, and, to the astonishment of the rest of the company, Guy entered the dining-room with Byron lying on his shoulder.

"Well, upon my soul !" exclaimed Nan. "The last person who tried to pick that brute up was the Archdeacon of Elderbury, and he was under the doctor for a fortnight with a lacerated hand. How did you manage it ? "

"Simply by according him the courtesies customary between gentlemen of taste and breeding."

"By telling him the dirty stories customary between a couple of town-rakes, more likely."

"Come, come, Nan," reproved Mr. Tucket genially, as he drew up his chair. "There's no need to be coarse —coarser than usual, that is."

When they settled down Guy was glad that he had taken the trouble to change into his modest grey lounge-suit, for he noticed that both Mrs. Musk and Mr. Tucket—as well as Nan—had smartened themselves up for the meal. The former had exchanged her workaday poplin for a black velvet gown with a chaste white lace collar and a surprisingly indecent *décolletage*. The latter had shed the emerald green fisherman's jersey which he had donned on leaving the graveyard, and replaced it with a precisely similar garment in canary yellow. He still retained his clerical collar, the stock neatly tucked into the vee of the sweater.

The meal was excellent ; the food simple but perfectly cooked, the wines first class ; and the Tucket household set-to with the vigour and noisy gusto of true gourmets. Obviously they had no time for the finicking niceties of table etiquette, nor, indeed, for the usual elementary courtesies. Tying their napkins round their necks, they snatched up their tools and shovelled back their nourishment with uninhibited smacking of the lips, champing of the jaws and explosions of wind. Wine decanters, sauce-boats and condiment containers were neither requested nor offered but were grappled for in a general free-for-all scramble, to cries of : 'For pity's sake get a move on, will you. . . . I suppose I'm expected to sit here all night, like soft Joe, with my belly lapping round my backbone. . . . That's right ! Take the perishing lot whilst you're about it. . . .'

Nan's table manners, Guy noticed, were particularly barbaric. In addition to stuffing her mouth so full that she could scarcely masticate, she jiggled about like a cat on hot bricks, now sprawling forward with her elbows amongst the crockery, now cockling her chair backwards at a perilous angle with her feet hooked around the gate-legs of the table. And, whenever she was obliged to pause for breath, she planted her fists on the cloth, on either side of her plate, with her knife and fork pointing vertically at the ceiling.

Guy, who had always reckoned himself a pretty fast eater, was completely outstripped, burning his tongue and well-nigh choking himself in his efforts to keep pace with the family. By the time the others were broaching the Stilton, he was still bogged down in a plateful of fruit pie sodden with brown sugar and luscious cream. Mr. Tucket eyed him reproachfully.

"Get stuck in there, Random ! Scuff up, my lad ! If you idle over your food you exhaust your taste-buds, and so lose half the flavour of your rations. And the faster you force it back the greater the flow of saliva, thereby facilitating the digestive processes. Allow me to fill up your glass."

In due course they reached the port, and Guy relapsed in his chair, completely surfeited. Nan and Mrs. Musk showed no inclination to retire, but settled down in their chairs with the obvious intention of drinking glass for glass with Guy and Mr. Tucket. There was a sharp altercation when Nan started to light a cigarette, the Rector declaring that he would not tolerate smoking with a wine of this nobility, and that she could either go and kipper herself in the garden or wait until the coffee.

A well-fed silence descended on the company, and the decanter was going round for the third time when

a startling interruption occurred. From the lane outside the house there came a sudden outburst of raucous shouts, jeering guffaws, shrill whistles and insulting vocal raspberries, the whole supported by a deafening orchestral accompaniment of clattering tin-cans and beaten buckets.

Guy gazed in bewilderment at Mr. Tucket who was glowering in front of him, his fists clenched.

"The Ran-tan-tan," he said grimly. "This is the third time in a fortnight."

"The what . . ." Guy started to enquire; but his words were drowned in the rising din from outside.

The uproar had now reached the Rectory gateway, and snatches of crude abuse were distinguishable through the general racket.

'Parson's a muckin' owd swindler . . . shove the owd barstud in gaol . . . bring out the perishin' oormonger . . . sling 'im in muckin' duck-pond . . . 'oo lost her knickers in Tickle-Fancy Spinney . . . 'oo lifts 'er apron fer butcher in coal-'ole. . . .'

Guy glanced rapidly from face to face. The Rector was grasping the arms of his chair, his features rigid and expressionless. Mrs. Musk was sitting with primly downcast eyes. Nan was peering reflectively into her glass of port. Taking advantage of a momentary lull, he again started to speak, but again his words were drowned in a renewed outbreak of yells, bangs and clatterings. It seemed that the manifestation was working up to a climax, and a moment later it arrived.

There was a scurry of footsteps on the drive and a hail of brick-bats crashed against the front door. Simultaneously a bucketful of cow manure sloshed against the window-panes and a handful of lighted fire-crackers dropped through the letter-slot onto the

hall floor where they darted hither and yon with prodigious explosions and clouds of acrid smoke.

At this, Guy leapt from his chair, snatched up the poker from the hearth and sprang towards the door. But Mr. Tucket arrested him with uplifted hand.

"No, Random, no ! You'll do no good. Listen ! They're clearing off."

Mr. Tucket was right, for as Guy reluctantly resumed his seat the tumult suddenly ceased and the scurry of footsteps receded down the lane towards the village.

The Rector relaxed in his chair and refilled his glass. "I understand your astonishment, Random, but we are getting quite used to this kind of demonstration nowadays. Allow me to explain. The Ran-tan-tan is a very ancient Elmshire custom. In days gone by it was regularly resorted to as a means of showing popular disapproval. It would be applied, for example, to a grasping landlord, or a cheating tradesman, or an adulterous spouse—a kind of rough mob-justice, so to speak. In more modern times it has, of course, fallen into abeyance ; but the old tradition still remains, ready to be stirred into action if somebody applies the right stimulus."

"You mean that Sir Walter Ramage has organised these scandalous demonstrations against you ?"

"No, Random, I wouldn't go so far as to say that. What Sir Walter *has* done is to stir up a general hostility towards me which, through the action of the collective subconscious, has erupted in the traditional form of the Ran-tan-tan. The conditions have got to be right, mark you. Even my most depraved parishioners wouldn't do this kind of thing in cold blood. I've no doubt that these demonstrations originate amongst the boozing fraternity up at the

Dropped Clanger, our local inn. Add a bellyful of beer to Sir Walter's bribes and slanders and you get an outbreak of hooliganism such as you have just witnessed."

"But the whole thing is monstrous," protested Guy. "You say this is the third time it's happened? Why on earth don't you do something about it—go to the police and have the brutes prosecuted for breach of the peace, or committing a nuisance, or whatever the appropriate charge may be?"

The Rector shrugged and threw out his hands. "My dear Random, you must try to be a little more realistic in this matter. Prosecute, indeed! How far do you think I should get against Sir Walter's wealth and influence? Precisely nowhere. He shoots and plays golf with the Chief Constable, and he has all the local solicitors in his pocket. And even if we did manage to get into court, he would simply fill the place up with bribed witnesses, all ready and eager to perjure themselves puce in the face, swearing that the defendants were safely tucked-up in bed at the time of the alleged offence." He paused and coughed discreetly. "And, in any case, if you cast your mind back to what I was telling you in the graveyard earlier on, you will appreciate that I am scarcely in a position to prosecute."

At this oblique reference to the deficiency in the Gumption Charity Fund there was a thoughtful silence, and Guy noticed to his surprise that Nan had had the grace to colour perceptibly.

Presently Mr. Tucket pushed back his chair and stood up. "I suggest we now adjourn. I, for one, find the combined aromas of cow-dung and gunpowder a trifle overpowering. With your permission, Random, we will delay the coffee and brandy for half

an hour or so whilst I polish off some correspondence and the womenfolk do the washing-up."

"By all means," replied Guy. "I personally should like to devote the next half-hour to a little quiet meditation."

At this there was a terrible rending crash from somewhere close at hand, and a dense cloud of white powder poured out from beneath the door behind Mrs. Musk's chair, filling the hall with a choking fog.

"Good God Almighty! The brutes are breaking into the house!" cried Guy, making another dash for the poker.

But again Mr. Tucket detained him. "Tranquillise yourself, Random. There is no cause for alarm. Just the remains of the dining-room ceiling coming down."

At nine o'clock they assembled for coffee and liqueurs in the drawing-room, a veritable salon, lofty, oblong, with fine bay windows giving onto the front lawn. The walls were covered with a bilious green paper, the floor with the threadbare remnants of a magnificent Chinese carpet. The furniture was solidly Victorian, built more for comfort than elegance; and the covers and hangings were in the same heavy style, all badly in need of repair. There was a profusion of occasional tables loaded with books, magazines, sporting trophies, Oriental knick-knacks and silver-framed photographs. A pretty little satinwood upright piano stood against one wall, and a tremendous white marble chimney-piece provided a sepulchral touch aptly in keeping with Mr. Tucket's graveyardly inclinations.

He was now wedged into his favourite armchair, nursing a balloon of Armagnac. Mrs. Musk and Nan were reclining in the ponderous sofa. Guy was pacing the carpet in a cloud of cigar smoke.

"In an affair of this kind, I am a great believer in the scurrilous anonymous letter."

"Yes? In what way?" enquired Mr. Tucket.

"As a means of softening up the enemy in the early stages and undermining his morale. It is a technique which I have found extremely helpful in a number of similar cases in the past, and I propose to employ it now."

"Ooh, what ever such fun!" said Nan. "I used to write the vilest ones imaginable to all the mistresses when I was at school, accusing them of everything from—"

"Quite so, Nan," interrupted Mr. Tucket. "We won't go into that just now. Your facility with the poison pen is sufficiently attested by the fact that you were expelled at the age of twelve, and that I was henceforth obliged to educate you myself since no other school in the country would permit you so much as to set foot in its vestibule."

"Well, you'll have plenty of scope for your talents now," said Guy, "because I intend to give Dodder the full treatment without delay. This Ran-tan-tan nonsense calls for a brisk and immediate counter attack."

He took some sheets of letter-paper from the writing-table and began to tear them into neat strips.

"The essence of successful anonymous letter-writing is to allow the imagination free play. Never hamper yourself by worrying about accuracy and plausibility. The principle of the thing is to accuse everybody of everything, regardless. The more preposterous the libels, the more readily are they believed. . . . Now, Mr. Tucket, there are two dozen slips of paper here, upon which I want inscribed the names of Sir Walter's most ardent supporters: twelve male and twelve female."

The Rector nodded and reeled off a list of names which Nan and Mrs. Musk pencilled on the pieces of paper. These Guy rolled into pellets, dropping them into two silver cups on the chimney-piece, male in one, female in the other.

"This is most interesting," said Mr. Tucket. "A kind of lottery, it would appear."

"Precisely, sir. And now for the draw."

Guy vigorously agitated the pellets in the two receptacles, which he then presented to Mr. Tucket.

"Now, sir, I would like you to draw simultaneously from both vessels, setting the pairs of pellets in orderly fashion on the table beside you."

The Rector did as he was bid.

"Good. We now have twelve pairs, each consisting of a male and a female," said Guy. "And I think we can claim that the coupling has been done absolutely fairly, without fear or favour."

"And what do we do with them now we've got them?" demanded Nan. "Or shall I tell you before you tell me?"

"We make a neat list of them and then start writing our fingers to the bone. To each member of each couple we send an anonymous letter accusing all the other couples. After that, we can rely on village gossip to set the cauldron bubbling. And since it's already half-past nine, I suggest we get to work without delay."

He was interrupted by a diffident cough from Mr. Tucket. "I flatter myself, Random, that I am a man of fairly keen intelligence and reasonably quick wits, but I must reluctantly confess that whilst the ingenuity of your system wins my unbounded admiration, I am not at all certain that I understand it."

"Which doesn't surprise me," answered Guy,

"since I'm not at all certain that I understand it myself."

"Then I am not, as I feared, taking leave of my senses. For a moment you had me quite shaken."

"Not half so shaken as the recipients of our letters will be. Our aim, remember, is to spread a state of utter confusion ; and since we appear to be utterly confused ourselves, we ought to achieve our purpose."

There was another diffident cough, this time from Mrs. Musk. "Excuse me, Mr. Random. I don't want to seem fussy, but there's just one small point that occurs to me."

"Yes ? "

"As I understand it, we write to everybody, accusing everybody else."

"You put the matter in a nutshell."

"But accusing them of *what*, Mr. Random ? "

Guy smiled reproachfully. "Oh, come ! Surely, to you who have lived all your life in Dodder, it must be abundantly obvious."

"No."

"Well, I've only been in the place five hours, and it's obvious enough to me—Nature-study in Tickle-Fancy Spinney, of course ! "

There was a thump on the door and Cecil thrust his head into the room.

"Bath watter's 'ot," he announced. "Bludy boiler's fair a-bouncin' oop muckin' chimbley ! "

"In that case," said Mr. Bucket, "we had better proceed at once with our ablutions. We can settle down to our letter-writing afterwards, over a convivial brew of tea. Ready, Random ? "

"Certainly. I'm looking forward to a hot dip after that long train journey. I'll go and get my kit."

"You will find the bathroom on the top landing,

immediately opposite the stairhead. There's no hurry. It takes quite a few minutes to get the tub filled."

Guy padded aloft, accompanied by Byron who thrice felled him to his knees by making friendly excursions between his legs. In view of the long trek to the bathroom he refrained from undressing, merely removing his jacket and slipping his dressing-gown over his shirt and trousers. Then, when he had finished his cigar, he gathered up his washing-gear and set forth.

He descended the short stairway from his outlying bachelor suite to the first landing, turned sharp left outside Alf's and, for the first time, mounted to the upper floor of the main block which contained the principal bedrooms. A bewildering maze of doorways and passages opened off the spacious landing, and he realised at once that the upper portion of Dodder Rectory was even more complicated in lay-out than the ground floor. It would obviously take him several days to familiarise himself with the complete architectural phantasmagoria of the parsonage.

Meanwhile, he recalled the Rector's instructions, and made for the door immediately opposite the stairhead. The sound of splashing water from within indicated that he had reached his goal, and he opened up to find himself enshrouded in a dense fog of hot steam.

He leaned against the door-post, peering blindly around him. Gradually his eyes became acclimatised and he began to catch fleeting glimpses of his surroundings : a big high room some twenty feet square ; bare walls mottled with flaking pea-green distemper ; an uneven board floor spread with tattered strips of linoleum ; a wide uncurtained window.

The fog of steam closed in again, then billowed, surged and dispersed under the cross-draught from the open door. The resultant view rooted Guy in his tracks. Situated in the middle of the floor was a ferro-zinc tank some eight feet square and four feet deep, of the type commonly found in farmyards for watering cattle. It was filled to the brim with scalding water—from which emerged the heads and shoulders of Nan, Mrs. Musk and Cecil.

"Ha! There you are, Random. We were beginning to fear that you'd got lost on the way and were about to send out a search party."

The Rector emerged from the thinning fog on the far side of the room, his sleeves rolled back to the armpits, a tin of green soft-soap in one hand, a domestic scrubbing-brush in the other.

"Strip off, dear lad, and hop in! The water won't keep hot indefinitely, you know. And there's no more after this lot, representing as it does the entire contents of the kitchen boiler."

Guy rarely talked about his work, but when he did he was fond of declaring that : 'The most important characteristic of the professional Negotiator is adaptability. For him there is nothing surprising ; there is only the unusual. And he will always remember that one man's unusual is another man's custom. Therefore, he will at all times speedily and gracefully adapt himself to the circumstances in which he is placed.'

This he now automatically did. Mixed bathing in a cattle-trough was an experience which had heretofore escaped him, but it was clearly an old established Tucket custom, and when in Rome. . . .

Whilst he sorted out his washing-gear on the windowsill, the Rector tested the temperature of the water with his elbow.

" I should warn you, Random, that it's pretty hot. But since our domestic arrangements permit only of one bath per week, it's as well to make a good job of it—particularly in warm weather. We've evolved a very satisfactory drill for it. First, a good long soak to open the pores, then I give everybody a thorough going-over with the scrubbing-brush ; after which I have my turn, Cecil or Mrs. Musk kindly obliging with the tools. We find the system works well, though I must confess that by the time I myself get in the water has usually lost a good deal of its heat and not a little of its cleansing properties. Ready ? "

As Guy slipped off his dressing-gown a profound silence enveloped the room. He glanced over his shoulder. The Rector was standing patiently by the tub, idly toying with his scrubbing-brush. But the three occupants were now kneeling up in the water with their elbows propped on the rim and their chins cupped in their palms, scrutinising him with the keenest attention. And this remorseless scrutiny was accompanied by an animated three-part running commentary.

" My word, what a corking shirt ! Pure silk, unless my eyesight fails me."

" Quite right, ducky. A lovely bit of stuff. And hand-tailored, too."

" And look at the way them trahsers 'ang. A fair treat. Musta cost 'im pahnds and pahnds."

" And a silk vest, too. How ever-so-ever-so."

" Yes, and such a pretty blue. Just the same colour as the nighty I had for my honeymoon ; Mr. Musk always said it made me look like a forget-me-not. Oh, dear ! He's gone and dropped it in that puddle."

" Oooh, isn't he lean ! Look, you can count every rib. A proper little famine-child."

"Yes, ducky. But as Mr. Musk always used to say : you can't fatten a thoroughbred."

"'E strips big an' no mistake. Look at them shoulders. I wouldn't like to try mixin' it with '*im* if 'e lost 'is muckin' temper, that I wouldn't ! "

"Now what, I wonder ? Oh, socks. I say, did you ever see such delicious little toes. Nary a corn, callous or bunion in the entire outfit. This little piggy went to market, this little piggy stayed at home. . . ."

"Look aht ! 'E's goin' ter drop 'em ! Any minute nah. . . ."

"There they go ! Oh dear, *what* a disappointment. I'd quite forgotten about those."

"Blue silk to match the vest, ducky. Very pretty, and such a neat fit. And his monogram on the leg, too. No expense spared : that's what I like to see."

"Proper hathlete's build, that's what 'e is. Look at them legs and thoighs. There ain't arf some power in that lot. An' a waist as yer could put yer two 'ands rarnd. Not an ounce o' spare flesh on 'im anywhere."

"Now for it, surely. It must be ; there's nothing else left. Move over, damn you, Cecil ! I can't see."

"Don't push, Nan ducky. It's rude. You'll see, all in good time, as Mr. Musk used to say. They like to tantalise you a bit, that's what it is."

"'Ere we go ! 'Old yer 'ats on, girls ! One—two—three. They're off ! "

"Oooh—ooooh—ooooooh. . . ."

"Wunnerful—wunnerful—I wouldn't never 'ave believed it ! "

"Well, it just goes to prove what Mr. Musk always used to say : you can tell a real gentleman at a single glance."

As Guy advanced and swung his leg over the edge of the tank, Nan gave an anxious cry.

"Oh, darling, do be careful, *please*! You might slip."

The Rector indicated the vacant corner. "There you are, Random. Between Nan and Mrs. Musk. Make yourself comfortable, and if the others start encroaching on your territory just give 'em a good hard kick."

With this, he plunged his hand into the tin of soft-soap and dug out a substantial portion for each bather in turn, slapping it down into their outstretched palms.

"Half left—turn! Back-soaping, from right to left, commence!"

Guy obediently swung into the drill, turning his own back towards Nan and applying his fistful of soap to Mrs. Musk's spine which was now presented towards him. Nothing if not thorough, he settled down to his task with all diligence, kneading away with both hands in anti-clockwise circles and hissing his breath between his teeth in the style of a groom curry-combing a horse.

He was just warming to his work when Mrs. Musk gave a prolonged hysterical whinny and wriggled so violently on her mountainous buttocks that she set up a tidal wave which overflowed the sides of the tub and soaked Mr. Tucket to the knees.

"Come now!" said Guy sharply. "Kindly stop jiggling about, and sit still."

She looked round peevishly over her shoulder. "I can't help jiggling about when you tickle my back like that. You'd do the same if Miss Nan was tickling yours."

"Not at all. I've more self-control, I'm happy to say."

"It's easy enough to talk, young man. I'd just like to see you prove it."

"I am proving it. You can see for yourself that I'm sitting perfectly still."

"Yes, but Miss Nan's not tickling your back."

"How right you are, Mrs. Musk—and I'm still sitting perfectly still."

There was a thoughtful pause. Then Mrs. Musk gravely inclined her head. "I beg your pardon, Mr. Random. I take back all I said. She always was a playful little thing ; as full of pranks as a wagon-load of monkeys."

8

By half-past ten the whole household was reassembled in the drawing-room for tea-drinking and anonymous letter-writing. Guy directed the work in his usual businesslike manner, organising a high-pressure four-piece secretariat consisting of himself, Nan, Mrs. Musk and the Rector. Cecil, whose education had by-passed reading and writing, was appointed tea-boy and envelope-licker. Such was the efficiency of the system that by midnight the letters were completed and ready for posting.

"I shall tricycle into Elderbury tomorrow and dispatch them myself through the General Post Office there," said Mr. Tucket. "A very agreeable way of spending my Sunday afternoon. The parish, I apprehend, will enjoy a stimulating start to the new week."

Nan meanwhile was hissing vehemently in Guy's left ear. "For pity's sake break it up and get 'em off to bed. Julian's due in an hour's time, and if anything goes wrong I shall burst."

"That I can readily believe, judging by the signs and portents already vouchsafed me."

He stood up, declaring himself exhausted and eager for bed. At this there was a general move and everybody went upstairs, except for Mr. Tucket, who plodded off with a flickering oil-lamp and a tremendous bunch of keys to shut up the house. This took a very long time, and whilst Guy undressed he could hear a steady thudding of oak, rattling of chains, rasping of locks and clanking of iron bars as the innumerable doors and window-shutters were secured for the night. He wondered what Nan's arrangements might be for her rendezvous with Julian, for the course of true love at Dodder parsonage was manifestly beset by formidable obstacles.

Guy was by temperament a night-bird, never feeling really well until after six o'clock in the evening and never running into his best form until the small hours. In consequence he was now wide awake and not in the least inclined for bed. For some time he sat in pyjamas and dressing-gown in the armchair, trying to read. But the oil-lamp on his bedside table gave such a wretched light and smelled so offensively that he finally put it out and lay back in the darkness to smoke a last pipe before turning-in.

He was roused by a stealthy whistle, thrice repeated, from somewhere outside the house. He edged over to the window which looked down into the courtyard. The big, cobbled rectangle, enclosed by the backward jutting wings of the mansion, was faintly illuminated by the light of the full moon rising over the ridge behind the village, and he detected the dim outline of a male figure lurking in the shadows by the diabolical pump.

Presently a window was cautiously opened on the

upper floor on the opposite side of the yard, and Guy recognised the white-robed bulk of Mrs. Musk. She leaned over the sill, murmured a few inaudible words, and withdrew, softly closing the window. Thereupon the figure by the pump sidled out of the gloom into the full moonlight. It was Major Gantree.

He darted across the yard to the back door, bent down and pulled up a stout iron grating let into the cobbles at the foot of the steps. The heavy grid swung upright on soundless hinges, leaving a hole some four feet square into which the Major deftly lowered himself and vanished. The grating quietly sank down again into its seating.

Guy was still pondering the incident when another stealthy whistle reached his ears. Again he peeped down into the courtyard and again he detected a figure hovering by the pump, this time unmistakably female. In response to the signal another window was raised on the upper storey of the opposite wing, disclosing the craggy features and characteristic hair-style of Cecil. More hoarse whispers filtered through the stillness, followed by the closing of the window. Guy watched with keen anticipation, and, after a slight pause, Miss Topsy Turvey scurried across the cobbles to the iron grating. She appeared to be in an even greater hurry than Major Gantree, negotiating the hole with the practised ease of a professional acrobat.

By now Guy's curiosity was properly piqued. The nocturnal social activities of Dodder Rectory were obviously both extensive and highly organised, and he determined to investigate this fascinating subterranean thoroughfare. Taking a pencil-type flash-lamp from his bag, he stole downstairs to the ground floor.

Having reached the inky vault of the back hall, he

slowly traversed the beam of his torch around the perimeter. In due course he detected a door, which he had not previously noticed, tucked into an alcove by the foot of the back stairs. It was standing ajar, and he advanced to investigate. He found himself at the top of a winding flight of stone steps up which there came a current of cool air.

He went down cautiously. Cobwebs brushed across his face and entwined themselves in his hair, making him grimace with distaste—distaste which mounted to revulsion when he realised that the slippery crunching under his sandalled feet was caused by a swarm of black beetles.

After descending some two dozen steps his calculations were confirmed. He was in the Rectory cellars : three low brick-floored chambers connected by open archways. The middle and left-hand ones were stocked with well filled wine-racks. The right-hand one was empty save for a colossal coke-furnace, mouldering in red rust, from which sprouted an iron jungle of intertwined pipes. This brutal contrivance, surrounded by mounds of rocky clinkers like the excretions of a volcano, had plainly been abandoned for many a decade. But at some time, presumably, some starry-eyed dreamer had entertained notions of installing a central heating system in Dodder parsonage. The mere idea of such a staggering enterprise left Guy aghast, and he was not surprised to observe that the undertaking had perished still-born.

Behind the defunct furnace there was a gap in the cellar wall, leading into an oblong pit ; and this, he discovered, was roofed by the iron grating at the foot of the back-door steps. He scrambled over the hillocks of clinkers, pushed up the grating and climbed out into the courtyard.

Dusting himself off, he lowered the grid into place and gratefully inhaled the clean night air. The natives of Dodder-in-the-Bottom took their social life seriously, it seemed, sparing neither ingenuity nor punishing physical exercise in discharging their duty towards their neighbour.

It was a beautiful night, and now that he was out of doors he felt less inclined than ever for sleep. He therefore made his way around to the front of the house and established himself in the cosy corner by the copper beech. He was delighted to find that the evening grog tray was still on the garden table, and he relaxed into the lounge-chair with a solid pink gin and a fruitily bubbling pipe. The sky was veiled by a faint mauve haze, and the hot still air was saturated with the scent of freshly mown hay.

Like all successful men of affairs, Guy had the knack of rigidly controlling his mental activities ; and no matter how pressing his current problems might be, he made it a rule to switch his mind right away from them as soon as he took off his trousers. ‘A sound night’s sleep is the professional Negotiator’s best friend,’ he was wont to aver. ‘When your livelihood depends upon thinking quicker than the other fellow you can’t afford to stumble into battle with a couple of cabin-trunks under your eyes.’

Now, however, he permitted himself to break his rule, and he settled down to consider his progress so far in the *affaire* Tucket. For this kind of preliminary review he had developed a special technique. He deliberately avoided concentrated thought. Instead, he turned his mind, in his own phrase, into ‘a receptive void.’ Long experience had taught him that the answer to a problem nearly always lay in some apparently trivial occurrence which often seemed

to have nothing whatsoever to do with the main issue ; and he had found that these immensely important little details were apt to be overlooked in a concentrated consideration. A state of 'receptive void,' on the other hand, allowed them to creep out of their corners and establish their true significance.

Sipping his gin and staring up vaguely into the pale violet sky, he applied his method to the past twelve hours. And, to his surprise, the first image that floated into the void was that of the lovely creature who had tried to pick him up on the train to Elderbury. His professional activities brought him so regularly into contact with gorgeous man-eaters that they had long since ceased to impress him except as a source of income. But this exquisite animal, he was bound to admit, was something quite exceptional. In spite of the brevity of their encounter, he had the clearest recollection of that copper hair, those emerald eyes and that splendid set of matched pectoral baggage.

He shifted in his chair and deliberately forced the image away. For a while nothing succeeded it. Then an incoherent jumble of impressions tumbled into the void : his leap for life into the nettle-filled ditch ; Julian's catapulted love letter ; the Ran-tan-tan hooliganism during dinner ; the mixed bathing operation ; the recently discovered tunnel of love in the Rectory cellars. A colourful series of events, indeed ; but none of them, somehow, had the right 'feel' about it. He shrugged. There was nothing to be gained by forcing the issue. After all, he had only been on the case for twelve hours, and the all-important feature might well be yet to come.

But he was not satisfied. He had an uneasy feeling that some highly significant detail really was hidden

away amongst the day's happenings if only he could lay his finger on it. He poured himself another gin and suddenly sat motionless, the glass arrested half-way to his lips.

Into his receptive void had popped a vision from his visit to the graveyard before dinner : the vision of Sir Walter Ramage scurrying from the church porch. He sat up, gripping the arms of his chair. He was onto something, he felt instinctively. There had been something that he had momentarily noted as odd, but which he had not precisely grasped at the time.

Then he had it. A tiny detail, but just the sort of little item that so often meant so much. Sir Walter had been carrying a binocular case—and he had been carrying it in a very unusual manner. Not casually slung over his shoulder in the ordinary way, but suspended *inside* his jacket. Deliberately concealed, in fact.

The key turned in the lock, and instantly a whole new vista of investigation opened up. Guy was there in a series of agile mental bounds. Binocular—church—church tower—binocular plus church tower. . . . But of course ! *Gandering !*

Two facts stuck out like a choirboy's ears. First, Sir Walter was himself a devotee of the popular local pastime. Second, his furtive behaviour clearly indicated that he wished to keep his hobby secret. The inference was obvious—there was more in gandering than met the eye. Guy sank back on the cushions and took a deep pull at his drink. Unless he was much mistaken he was onto something of real importance. At the first opportunity he would make a discreet trip to the summit of Dodder-in-the-Bottom church tower.

He was jerked out of his reverie by a sharp crackling of twigs followed by a suppressed yelp of anguish and a stifled oath. He sat up and stared across the drive towards the tree-shadowed lane outside the Rectory. Were the hooligans from the Dropped Clanger returning to make another obnoxious demonstration against the Rector? If so, nothing would stop him this time from teaching one or two of them a very sharp lesson. It was a long time since he had enjoyed a real rough-and-tumble and exercised those fancy tricks of unarmed combat which he had picked up in the dockside taverns of five continents.

From his dark corner under the copper beech he saw a slim male figure slowly rise from the ground by the gap in the boundary hedge which served as the official entrance to the Rectory grounds. Guy grinned and suppressed a chuckle. The intruder, whoever he might be, had obviously overlooked the skein of barbed wire which constituted the Rectory front gate.

A moment later the identity of the visitor was revealed, for, having disentangled his shins from the cruel mantrap in which they were enmeshed, he limped across the drive, stationed himself by the front-door porch and gave a low warbling whistle. There could be no doubt about it—this must be Julian Ramage, the object of Nan's consuming passion and the son of her father's mortal enemy.

Guy relaxed in his chair, smiling happily. Under the hard-boiled exterior of the professional Negotiator he was an incorrigible romantic, and the pathetic ardours of adolescent love never failed to touch his heart. As the son of an impoverished country clergyman he had never had time to indulge in youthful passion, being too fully occupied, from the age of fifteen onwards, with learning to speak foreign

languages, to cheat gracefully at cards, to charm rich widows and generally to fit himself for earning his own living as soon as possible. He always regretted having missed the raptures of young love, and never failed to encourage it and smooth its path whenever opportunity occurred.

Now he watched the scene before him with the keenest and kindliest interest. The moon was well above the horizon, and he had a clear view of the front of the Rectory bathed in a pale amber radiance. Nor was he disappointed. Julian had scarcely made his signal when Nan appeared at her bedroom window. Cocking a long slim leg over the sill, she scrambled down the three-foot drop onto the porch roof and inclined herself perilously over the parapet, her arms widespread.

Guy sympathised with her enthusiasm, for Julian cut a romantic figure indeed. Slender, almost fragile in build, he was dressed in tight black trousers and a loose white shirt with Byronic collar and full sleeves caught in closely at the wrists. He stood looking upwards, with his left foot advanced, his hands outflung and a lock of black wavy hair tumbling across his forehead. His voice carried softly yet distinctly through the stillness :

" ' But, soft ! what light through yonder window breaks ?
It is the east, and Nan Tucket is the sun !
Arise, fair sun, and kill the envious moon,
Who is already sick and pale with grief,
That thou her maid art far more fair than she. . . .'"

Guy sat entranced. This was perfect, quite perfect. Two star-crossed lovers in a moonlit garden with undying passion in their hearts and immortal poetry on their lips.

Nan pressed her hands to her bosom and well-nigh fell off the porch roof :

“ ‘ Oh, Julian, Julian ! wherefore art thou Julian ?
Deny thy father and refuse thy name ;
Or, if thou wilt not, be but sworn my love,
And I’ll no longer be a Tucket. . . .’ ”

Guy’s breath caught in his throat, his eyes stung. This was too much. It was sacrilege to eavesdrop on these heart-wringing manifestations of tender innocent passion. He must slip away and leave them alone in the bliss of their all too brief moment of ecstasy.

He rose from his chair and began to edge into the cover of the beech tree whence he could make his escape unobserved. But, as he did so, there was a blinding flash of light and a shattering explosion from somewhere overhead, and a hail of small-shot ploughed up the gravel of the drive. As he flung himself to the ground he heard a roar of anger, a yelp of terror, and then another appalling detonation.

“ Winged him, by Gad ! Peppered his backside for him, unless I’m much mistaken ! That’ll teach the young devil to come creeping round here in the middle of the night.”

Guy rose to his knees and squinted around the trunk of the tree. Mr. Tucket was leaning out of a bedroom window at the right-hand corner of the house. He was clearly greatly enraged. A white night-cap, with a pendulous bobble on top, rode askew over one ear ; with his clenched left hand he made threatening gestures in the direction of the porch ; with his right he grasped a double-barrelled twelve-bore from the twin muzzles of which two wisps of burnt cordite smoke floated up into the still night air.

Guy was horrified. The old gentleman had given

Julian both spouts at almost point-blank range ; in view of which it seemed more than likely that Sir Walter Ramage was now in short supply of a son and heir. He was about to dash forward and investigate when, to his intense relief, he saw a terrified white face peeking out of the black interior of the porch. Julian was apparently still warm and mobile, thereby proving that he was an uncommonly fast mover or that the Rector was an uncommonly poor shot.

Meanwhile, a considerable uproar was developing inside the Rectory—shouts, screams, scamperings of feet, furious slammings of doors. There was no time to lose. Mr. Tucket had withdrawn from the window, but only, it was to be feared, for the purpose of re-loading. Guy raced across the drive, shot into the porch where Julian was cringing behind the bales of straw, seized him by the arm and dragged him back into the cover of the copper beech.

Twenty minutes later he was still pouring whisky into the victim who was supine on the cushions in the lounge-chair.

"Come along, my dear chap. Brace up ! You're perfectly safe now."

Julian, looking frailer and more pathetic than ever, raised himself on one elbow and tremblingly lit a cigarette. "Brace up, indeed ! It's all right for you to talk. You've not just been blown arse-over-tip with a bloody great harquebuss. It was damn lucky that I heard him open the window and had time to nip into the porch. Otherwise he'd have filled me to the nostrils with base metal."

"A disturbing experience," agreed Guy. "But we must always remember that the course of true love never did run smooth. As you grow older you will discover that the three most serious obstacles

to a satisfactory sex-life are narrow-minded fathers, broad-shouldered husbands and tight-fisted bank managers."

"Narrow-minded fathers, too true! What with my own brute stopping my allowance, and old Tucket using me for a clay pigeon, I'm beginning to feel it isn't worth it."

Guy patted his shoulder. "Cheer up, my dear fellow. We all feel that way at times. I well remember my own pessimistic reactions, at the age of sixteen, when a testy spouse tossed me over a balcony and through the roof of an adjacent conservatory. But a glimpse of the doxy in her nighty soon sets all to rights."

Julian eyed him suspiciously. "What do you mean by that?"

"Just a gentle reminder that time flies and the lady is waiting."

"Am I to understand that you're suggesting that I have another try at getting in there?"

"But of course. A gentleman must always keep his appointments and fulfil his obligations, as I'm sure you will agree."

"If you think that I'm going to expose myself to a concentrated artillery barrage twice in one night, you're very much mistaken. As soon as I've had another double whisky I'm off home to bed—and smartish."

"But you can't do that!"

"Can't I? Just you watch me."

"But don't you realise that the poor child is up there vibrating like a tuning-fork, and—"

"All I realise is that I have no intention of being converted into a mobile colander. Kindly pass that bottle."

Guy saw that Julian was indeed completely unnerved. Stern measures would be necessary to recall him to a sense of duty. He sighed and shook his head.

"Ah, well, I suppose that's the way it goes. The Old Windbag was right, as usual. 'Blow, blow thou winter wind, thou art not so unkind as man's ingratitude.'"

Julian twitched on the cushions. "What—what are you getting at?"

"Gambling debts. That's what I'm getting at."

"Oh, I see." Julian hung his head and fiddled with his glass.

"I wonder if you do see. I wonder if you have the slightest notion of the sacrifices that girl has made to retrieve your crass ineptitude with a pack of cards."

"Well, after all, she loves me. And when her great-aunt left her that nice little legacy——"

"So that's what she told you. I might have guessed it. Not content to preserve your honour, she must needs spare your feelings as well."

"You mean—you mean there wasn't a legacy?"

"Of course there wasn't. If you really want to know, Nan earned the money to pay your poker debts by attending a millionaire's supper party incarcerated in a Cornish pasty, and by subsequently circumambulating the table, on her hands, for the sake of the five pound bonus."

Julian fretfully combed his fingers through his hair, plainly torn between self-respect and self-preservation. At last he shrugged resignedly.

"All right, you win. But if the old gentleman picks me off, my blood will be on your head."

Very shortly thereafter Guy was once more yanking up the iron grating at the foot of the back-door steps. "Come along, now! There's no need to be nervous.

This brings us out through the cellars into the back hall. You'll be perfectly safe."

Julian hesitated on the brink, looking down fearfully into the black pit.

"Go on," urged Guy. "It's a thoroughly well-blazed trail, I assure you. In fact, judging by the volume of traffic on it tonight, we shall soon have to fit it with control-lights and zebra crossings."

A few minutes later, having delivered Julian safely at his destination, he crept up the branch stairway to the bachelor suite. By now he was feeling ready for bed, and he turned in at once. He composed his mind with a few pages from *The Pilgrim's Progress*, his regular nightly sedative; after which he drew the lavender-scented covers up to his chin and immediately passed into a deep peaceful sleep. But not for long.

The hazards of his profession had endowed him with an almost animal knack for sensing anything untoward when he was asleep, and for waking instantaneously from a profound slumber with all his senses alert. This he did at two-thirty a.m. precisely. Conditioned by a wide experience of close shaves in tight corners, he lay perfectly still, maintaining undisturbed the steady rhythm of his breathing. But his eyes, through scarcely parted lids, expertly traversed the brightly moonlit room.

Mrs. Musk was standing in the doorway, clad in a long white flannelette nightgown copiously smocked, gored, ruched and placketed. Her oily black hair was unconfined, hanging down over her shoulders to the small of her back. Her eyes were open, fixed in an unfocused stare, and her arms were fully extended in front of her at right-angles to her torso.

Guy sat up, vexed and disturbed. Mrs. Musk, it seemed, was indulging in a bout of sleep-walking, and

he had never before had to deal with a person in this condition. He had vague recollections, however, of dreadful warnings about the dangers of a too sudden awakening which might cause the victim a grievous shock and, indeed, lead to a permanent unseating of the reason. On the other hand, the patient could not be left to prowl around regardless, for fear of sustaining serious physical injury. Strolling nonchalantly out of upper-floor windows was, he seemed to remember, a practice to which sleep-walkers were particularly prone.

He was still trying to decide what to do for the best when Mrs. Musk started to advance into the room. He watched her anxiously ; and his anxiety sensibly increased when he saw that she was making a bee-line for the bed. He ventured a discreet cough and cautiously agitated his legs, thereby producing a melodious harp-like twanging from the dilapidated springs. But all to no avail. Mrs. Musk bore down upon him with the remorseless progress of a cruiser tank, brushing aside, with a single thrust of her powerful thighs, the wicker armchair that stood in her path.

As she reached the bedside, Guy drew back sharply and could not restrain a protest. "Come now, Mrs. Musk ! This will never do, you know. We can't have you galloping round the house in your nighty in this fashion. You'll catch your death of cold——"

The words died in his throat as Mrs. Musk, with the precise unhurried motions of an automaton, poised herself stork-style on one leg and nimbly slid the other between the sheets, beside him.

Guy's reaction to this was to get out of bed with a speed which he had not achieved for the past twenty years and more. At the same time he felt a keen sense

of relief that the situation had resolved itself so easily. Obviously Mrs. Musk was under the impression that this was her own bed, and she would now settle down.

But he was speedily disabused of this comforting notion when Mrs. Musk, far from settling down, stalked across the mattress and again bore down upon him as he backed away towards the window.

This was getting really awkward. It seemed, indeed, as if she were actually pursuing him. He coughed again, more loudly, and side-stepped to the wardrobe. Like a blind-flying aircraft locked onto a homing-beam, she followed him relentlessly. He dodged over to the dressing-table and thence to the wash-stand, but he was quite unable to shake her off. She seemed as if endowed with unconscious sight, countering, even anticipating, his every manoeuvre with uncanny agility. He automatically speeded up his movements, only to produce a corresponding acceleration in his pursuer ; and, within fifteen seconds, he found that Mrs. Musk and himself had become involved in an impromptu and increasingly boisterous game of blind-man's-buff.

The situation was both ludicrous and embarrassing, and he must put an end to it without delay. A crafty reverse circuit round the night-commode brought him a moment's respite. Either he must forcibly awaken her, risking a dangerous shock to her nervous system, or . . .

The alternative had no sooner occurred to him than he acted upon it with all promptitude. He slipped out from behind the commode and made for the door, where he whipped the key out of the lock with the intention of confining Mrs. Musk in the bedroom until she came to her senses by natural means. But as

he reached the threshold he sharply recoiled, for he found himself face to face with Miss Topsy Turvey.

She, too, it appeared, was in the throes of sleep-walking, for her general port and mien closely resembled Mrs. Musk's. There was the same disordered hair, the same vitreous gaze, the same extension of the arms. The only considerable difference was sartorial, Miss Turvey being stark naked.

He was trying to adjust himself to this new development when a dire clatter of loose ironmongery behind him distracted his attention. Glancing around, he saw that Mrs. Musk had now got back into his bed where she was firmly establishing herself in the central crater. Then, as he turned again to face Topsy, he despaired a third figure advancing from the stairhead with fixed stare and rigidly out-thrust arms. It was Nan in a charming little apron-length night-shift of turquoise chiffon.

A lifetime's experience of 'arranging matters' had taught Guy that, in certain circumstances, the wisest course was to let matters arrange themselves. This, he divined, was such an occasion, and, pulling the door wide open, he ushered in the new arrivals with a resigned flourish of the hand.

Thereupon, matters did, in fact, arrange themselves, and smartly. Topsy's gaze concentrated upon Mrs. Musk, now hull down in the mattress ; and, suddenly springing out of her rigor, she darted across the floor and vaulted into the bed on Mrs. Musk's left. A pale blue blur flashed past Guy's eyes as Nan bounded through the doorway and leapt in on Mrs. Musk's right.

The subsequent developments were marked by a vigour and animosity unsurpassed in Guy's experience. Within the space of three seconds his bed had become

the scene of a vicious triangular conflict in which no holds were barred, no quarter asked, and certainly none given. A single glance sufficed to show him that any attempt at intervention would be not only fruitless but extremely unwise. He therefore hastened to shut not only the bedroom door but also the door at the top of the staircase. The situation was complex enough, as it was, without the possible addition of the Rector with his fowling-piece.

Meanwhile, the turmoil on the bed was steadily thickening up. The three occupants were now inextricably intertwined in a single turgid mass, kicking, gouging, clawing and biting with unexampled ferocity and in a savage animal silence which made the spectacle doubly impressive. The room resounded with panting gasps, creaking sinews, bitter slaps and the clangorous rattling of the tottering bedstead ; but the only sounds uttered by the contestants were siccitous grunts, anguished yelps and staccato monosyllables of basic English.

At first Guy was at a loss to understand the underlying principle of the brawl ; but presently it dawned upon him that each of the three women was intent upon expelling the other two from the bed and securing undisputed possession of it for herself. And this, he saw, accounted for the extraordinary complexity of the struggle, since every one was simultaneously involved with not one but two opponents.

At the end of two minutes, having fully appreciated the position, Guy decided that there was nothing more he could usefully do, and that nature must be left to take its course. He therefore seated himself in the wicker armchair, crossed his legs and started patiently to fill his pipe. But just as he was applying the match, the battle, which appeared to be settling down to a

steady war of attrition, was suddenly terminated by the complete disintegration and collapse of the bed.

During the ensuing dead silence Guy completed the lighting of his pipe, looking down through the cloud of smoke at the three tousled heads projecting from the mound of wreckage on the floor.

"And to what," he enquired coldly, "do I owe the pleasure of this altogether unexpected visit—or should I say invasion?"

The response was varied. Topsy started to giggle foolishly. Mrs. Musk, lowering her eyelids, assumed her customary air of prim gentility. Nan, tossing back her mop of curls, eyed him with mingled astonishment and exasperation.

"There's no need to be so lah-de-dah about it. What do *you* think?"

"I prefer to keep an open mind."

"Well, it weren't to talk about the weather," said Topsy tersely. "No more to see if your socks needed darnin', neither."

"I always like to assure myself," said Mrs. Musk, "that our guests are comfortable—and that they have everything they need."

"Some needin' more than others, in a manner of speakin'!"

"Too jolly true, my word, my word!"

Guy was distinctly irritated by his visitors' composure, which amounted, he felt, to something not far short of effrontery. They had invaded his room in the middle of the night, involved themselves in a riotous rough-and-tumble and finally destroyed his bed—all without a single word of apology. And now, it seemed, they were preparing to settle in for a lengthy exchange of doubtful conversation. It was high time the incident was terminated.

Accordingly, he rose from his chair and opened the door. "Whilst I greatly appreciate your combined concern for my well-being, I could not dream of allowing myself to benefit at the expense of others. I have reason to believe that you all have pressing duties awaiting you elsewhere, and therefore I will not detain you further."

"I 'aven't got no duties awaitin' me."

"Nor me neither, drat it!"

"But surely . . ."

"Come, come, Mr. Random, you must try to make allowances for the weaker brethren, as the saying goes. They haven't all got your experience and sang-froid, you know. Them terrible loud bangs, just now, when Mr. Tucket fired off his gun—very disturbing. Very disturbing indeed."

"Disturbin'! I should just say so. Paralysin', more like. Proper paralysin'."

"Bangs, upon my soul! Disturbing, indeed! You should see the effect of two near-misses, then you *would* have something to grumble about."

Guy looked down stonily at the row of expectant faces. "I see," he said quietly. "I see." He stepped backwards into the doorway. "And since you are all now free of your social obligations, you will be able to settle down to a comfortable night—or to what little of it remains. Good morning to you!"

Shortly afterwards, wrapped in an assortment of overcoats and mackintoshes culled from the pegs in the hall, he was sound asleep in the chaise-longue under the copper beech.

9

DODDER RECTORY was lapped in the post-luncheon stupor of a torrid Sunday afternoon.

Gravid with a monster meal of roast beef, Yorkshire pudding and jam roly-poly, which Mr. Tucket had bullied him into devouring, Guy lay in a deck-chair on the lawn, reading the *News of the World*. He was assisted in his task by the cat Byron who, with the sagacity of a highly trained gun-dog, 'pointed' all the juicier paragraphs with severed twitchings of the whiskers and tigerish fannings of the tail. Through the open windows of the drawing-room came the steady thump and tinkle of the piano as Nan worked off her frustrated passions by extemporising tangos and baions on popular hymn-tunes. She had been very sulky since the previous night's fiasco, her behaviour varying between an icy reserve and petulant outbursts of childish rage in the course of which she had jabbed the carving-fork in Mrs. Musk's left buttock, pitched a two-pound flat-iron at Cecil's head and deliberately poured a plateful of scalding soup into Guy's lap—the last accompanied by a singularly offensive observation.

At three o'clock the peace was shattered by the eruption through the front door of Mr. Tucket on his tricycle. Rocketing down the wooden ramp with a brisk fanfare on his bulb-horn, he swerved away across the drive en route for Elderbury to post the anonymous letters.

"Capital exercisc!" he cried as he flashed past.

"Smartens up the liver and stimulates the gastric juices. You should try it sometime."

Availing himself of the new fairway created by the collapse of the front gate, he vanished into the lane in a stylish three-wheel drift and a cloud of dust and pebbles.

Guy knocked out his pipe and got up. With everybody out of the way, this was a suitable moment to pay his visit to the church tower. When working on a case he always kept his plans to himself as far as possible, having learned very early in his career that the fewer people one took into one's confidence the better. Indeed, his firmness in this respect was notorious, and clients who imagined that their engagement of his services entitled them to interfere were invariably told to mind their own business—'which is, to keep your mouth shut and your cheque-book open.'

Presently he was strolling down the lane with carefully assumed nonchalance. A countryman born and bred, he knew that he could not hope to make his trip to the church undetected. To the innocent observer Dodder might appear, on this sun-stunned Sunday afternoon, to be a village of the dead ; but he was well aware that a hundred pairs of ravenous eyes would be watching his every move, through half-drawn curtains or from the cover of shadowy passageways and crumbling potting-sheds.

Accordingly, he had done his best to fit himself into his semi-ecclesiastical role. Regardless of the heat, he had put on his grey suit and a dark tie. The Rector's binocular, which he had borrowed from the hat-rack in the hall, was concealed under his jacket ; and, tucked under his arm, he carried a ponderous dog-eared tome which, he reckoned, would lend a sober, scholarly touch to his appearance—in spite of

its being, in fact, Nan's *Monster Fun Book* from the W.C. library.

With his chin sunk on his breast and his hands clasped on his stomach, he paced slowly past the duck-pond, up the graveyard pathway and into the south porch. The local spies, he hoped, would assume that he was intent upon an afternoon of secluded meditation.

Once under cover, he lost no time. He stepped into the musty coolness of the church, closed the heavy iron-studded door behind him and made straight for the vestry at the west end. There, as he expected, he found the entrance to the tower stairway. The narrow oak door, approached by a couple of worn stone steps, squeaked open on rusted hinges.

When he emerged onto the sun-baked leads he squatted down on his heels, carefully keeping his head below the breast-high parapet. In this brilliant light any unguarded movement would easily be spotted from below. With his eyes narrowed against the glare, he looked about him, and his glance fell upon an empty orange-box standing on end in the south-east corner of the parapet. It was a commonplace object enough, and, to the casual eye, no more than an unsightly bit of litter. But the Random eye was never casual ; it was the highly trained organ of a professional Negotiator.

The box was situated immediately below one of the rectangular cut-outs in the rim of the parapet ; and it occurred to him that a man of medium height, seated on the perch, would be able conveniently to look through the gap whilst remaining totally hidden save for the top of his head. Unless he was very much mistaken, he had located Sir Walter Ramage's gander-stand—a less elaborate affair, certainly, than Major

Gantree's ingenious eyrie, but considerably its superior in elevation.

Still in the knccs-bend position, he edged across the leads and hoisted himself onto the box. As he had calculated, his eyes were precisely on a level with the aperture. He drew the leather case from under his coat, raised the binocular to his eyes and carried out a trial focus on a clump of trees some six hundred yards distant. The glasses, though old, proved to be of excellent quality, and, as he adjusted them, they brought in a wealth of sharply defined detail.

Suddenly his attention was riveted by an unnatural movement in the green wall of foliage on which he was focusing. He made a still finer adjustment and chuckled quietly. There was no doubt about it : he was now staring straight into Major Gantree's ganderstand, and it was a full house indeed. His view was obscured by leaves and twigs, but there were plainly at least a dozen persons jammed onto the wooden platform between the branches. He recalled the Major's telephone conversation at the bungalow the previous afternoon. Obviously his crony had taken him at his word and brought over the entire house-party.

Having thus pin-pointed the Major's observation-post, he started to look elsewhere and immediately made an interesting discovery. The aperture in the parapet was so formed that he had practically no lateral vision at all. His outlook was restricted, in fact, to a direct view across the central built-up area of the village.

He lowered his glasses and sat back. This was food for thought indeed—especially so when one remembered that the Major's ganderstand was similarly restricted. It was becoming increasingly clear that

whatever the pastime of gandering might be, it had nothing to do with bird-watching or like forms of nature-study, as he had so glibly assumed. For that type of recreation one needed the full scope of the surrounding countryside. What was it, then, that impelled the natives of Dodder to squander their hard-earned wages on expensive optical instruments ; that spurred Major Gantree to such arduous feats of amateur carpentry ; that persuaded Sir Walter Ramage to pass sweltering summer afternoons squatting on an orange-box on top of the church tower ?

Completely nonplussed, Guy raised his binocular again and fell to scanning his limited field of vision. There was nothing remarkable to be seen—simply a commonplace patchwork of assorted dwellings, gardens, orchards, driveways, outhouses. A bird's-eye view, in fact, of an ordinary English village. And, just now, it was particularly uninteresting, being, as it was, enveloped in the Sunday afternoon siesta. There was not the slightest movement to be detected anywhere, neither of man nor beast.

At this stage, a less persevering man might have written the whole thing off as a waste of time. But when Guy's instinct told him that he was onto something he followed up with relentless pertinacity. Having rested his eyes, he started again to search the area minutely ; and this time he was rewarded by some slight sign of life.

He had already noticed, isolated amongst the jumble of ancient cottages and modern villas, a charming red-brick Queen Anne house with a big walled garden in rear. And now a trim young maid-servant had emerged from the french windows at the back of the house onto the wide sun-drenched lawn, half of which was laid out as a croquet-green.

She was weighed down by a pile of cushions and rugs and an inflated rubber mattress.

Having reached the middle of the lawn, she stopped and looked back towards the house. Guy automatically traversed in the same direction—whereupon he drew in his breath with an audible hiss and stiffened on his orange-box like a graven image.

Another woman was now strolling out onto the sunburnt turf, moving with the lithe poised grace of a lounging gazelle. She was somewhat above the middle height, her figure combining a thoroughbred delicacy of bone with a notable opulence of curve. Her features were obscured by a pair of sun-glasses and a big straw hat of the coolie type—apart from which she was guiltless of a single stitch.

Guy settled his elbows on the parapet and adjusted still more finely the focus of his binocular. She was a regular eyeful and no mistake about it. A proper corker. And judging by her magnificent tan, she must devote a great deal of time to exposing her person in this ungrudging fashion. Meanwhile, the maid had arranged the comforts on the grass and disappeared into the house.

Her mistress, however, showed no immediate inclination to settle down. Instead, she began a leisurely tour of the garden, now reaching up on tip-toe to pinch off a withered blossom, now squatting down on her heels, squaw-fashion, to pluck up an offending weed. Some thirty minutes were passed in this way, at the end of which even Guy's encyclopædic knowledge of the wonders of nature was materially enlarged. It was not, indeed, until half-past four that she finally extended herself on the mattress to eat a substantial tea which the maid had wheeled out on a low trolley.

Now that she had come to rest, Guy concentrated his scrutiny on her head. Having already seen so much, he was eager to complete the picture. He was still thwarted, however, by the sun-glasses and hat which concealed her completely from the chin up. After watching patiently for another fifteen minutes, on the chance that she might unmask, he finally gave it up. There would be plenty of time later to satisfy his curiosity. He withdrew from the parapet and lit his pipe.

So *this* was gandering. Small wonder that the youth on the bus had been willing to spend thirty pounds on a second-hand binocular. Small wonder that even so case-hardened a man of the world as Toby Gantree should be at such pains to establish himself in the orchestra stalls. And as for Sir Walter Ramage . . .

Guy smiled to himself and blew out a perfect smoking-ring into the still, hot air. Once again his methods were bearing fruit. Once again, by seizing on the apparently trivial detail, he had put an entirely new complexion on a problem. The devotees of this curious local folk-ritual might call themselves ganderers, or ganderists, or even gandereros. But the plain fact remained that, in everyday parlance, there was a very much cruder term for them—Peeping Toms. And that was a title scarcely in keeping with Sir Walter's reputation as an eminent industrialist, a Justice of the Peace, a Deputy Lieutenant and a relentless watchdog of public morals.

Guy glanced at his watch. Five o'clock. A very useful afternoon's work, yielding much to think about. And the best place for thinking, on an afternoon like this, was in the shade of the Rectory copper beech with a scalding cup of Lapsang Souchong and a slice of lemon.

He started to get down from his perch, hesitated, and, with a deprecatory shrug, picked up his binocular again. After all, one was only human, and it wasn't every day that one had the opportunity to see an Ingres *odalisque* devouring cucumber sandwiches. But the garden was now deserted. The rubber mattress was unoccupied and the tea-trolley had disappeared. The show, then, was over ?

He swung his glasses upwards to see if the Major and his party had quitted their observation post in the tree. On the contrary. The wooden platform now appeared to be more densely populated than ever. Furthermore, the occupants seemed to be in a state of great agitation, jostling and chivvying one another in the most reckless fashion. In fact, but for the stout guard-rail with which the Major had prudently surrounded his structure, several of his guests must inevitably have fallen off and broken their necks. What could be the reason for this renewed outburst of enthusiasm amongst the *aficionados* ?

Guy turned his glasses back onto the garden and his question was immediately answered. Far from the show's being over, it was plainly only just beginning, for mistress and maid had now reappeared in the french windows, carrying croquet mallets. And now they were identically dressed.

Guy's lips tightened and he firmly returned his binocular to its case. The sooner he got back to the Rectory the better. He had some hard thinking to do ; and unless he was very careful he would find his thoughts bogged down in a vicious circle.

When he got back to the Rectory he found Mr. Tucket, Nan and Mrs. Musk having tea on the lawn. In spite of the heat and their recent tremendous luncheon, they were methodically decimating the

customary profusion of sandwiches, cakes and assorted *petits fours*.

"Hurry along there, Random!" cried the Rector. "Never neglect your meals! An active young fellow like you needs plenty of regular nourishment to keep his strength up."

At this there was an audible sneer from Nan behind the teapot, and Mrs. Musk heaved a resigned sigh.

"And whilst we're on the subject of strength, Random, I have a small favour to ask of you. I wonder if you would be kind enough to pump the organ for us at evensong."

"But of course. I should be delighted."

"Thank you, my dear fellow. You see, I rather want to lay-on a good show tonight because I hear that Major Gantree is bringing a considerable party of guests to the service. Since Sir Walter deprived me of my regular organist and blower we have had no music at all. However, if you will undertake to pump, Nan is prepared to do her best at the instrument. No fancy stuff, of course; just a few bursts of joyful noise to get things going with a swing. I, for my part, shall give them hell from the pulpit."

"I keenly look forward to hearing you. It is a long time since I had the pleasure of listening to a good sermon."

"Very obliging of you, my boy. But I warn you not to expect any of this modern milk-and-water stuff. Back to fundamentals is my motto. Harps and haloes or flames and brimstone, and no ifs and buts about it. That's me."

"I heartily endorse that view."

"I'm delighted to hear it," exclaimed Mr. Tucket, clapping him on the shoulder. "Smack 'em back on their fundaments, and keep 'em there, that's the idea!"

The erratic clangour of a single bell came from the church tower, and Mr. Tucket got up.

"There's the faithful Cecil doing his stuff; and, judging by the sound of things, he's been after my hock in the font again. Time we were getting along."

Guy, who was uncommonly thirsty after his recent excursion, delayed to swallow a couple of cups of tea whilst the others went on ahead. Consequently, he did not reach the church until the stroke of six, just as Cecil was concluding his fanciful exercise in syncopated campanology.

When he went in he was surprised to find a considerable congregation. The nave was sprinkled with some three score worshippers—or, more accurately, spectators. For one and all were eagerly craning their necks towards the two front rows of seats below the pulpit where Major Gantree was busily distributing hymn-books amongst his loudly chattering guests. Obviously, Sir Walter's boycott on church attendance had failed to stop a fair number of his supporters from coming along to indulge their curiosity.

As Guy made his way towards the organ, situated on the north side of the chancel, he was aware that the centre of interest had shifted to himself. Not only the natives but the Major's party, too, were turning in their seats to have a good look at him. Meanwhile, Nan was beckoning to him irritably from her seat at the console.

"Put a jerk in it, Random!" she hissed. "Late as usual. You're gumming-up the entire fiesta."

Guy made a rapid inspection of his technical equipment. A stout wooden bar, some five feet in length, with a rounded hand-grip, protruded from the flank of the instrument. Above it, on the pitch-pinc casing, a small leaden weight dangled from a piece of string

which disappeared over a pulley-wheel into the bowels of the mechanism. Alongside there was a series of jagged arrow-heads crudely hacked into the woodwork : some kind of indicator-scale, presumably.

"That's your fuel-gauge," said Nan. "When that lump of lead sinks to the bottom, the reservoir is full ; and vice versa. The idea is to keep it dead-centre. If you under-pump, I go as flat as a pancake. If you over-pump, the excess wind blows off like a puffing grampus. Ready ? "

Guy laid hold of the handle, like a galley-slave wrapping himself around his oar, and heaved it smartly up and down until the lead weight sank to maximum capacity.

"Right," said Nan, "let's go ! And see that you don't let me run out of wind when I give her full bore on the swell."

With this she swung into her opening voluntary, a startling but short-lived rendering of *Oh, for the Wings of a Dove !* Startling, because she absent-mindedly launched off in a spanking mambo rhythm ; short-lived because, in an excess of emotion, she incontinently opened every available vent to the fullest extent, with the result that Guy was caught unawares and the voluntary expired in a gruesome windless moan.

Major Gantree's voice came crisply from the front row. "Look lively there, Random ! You're half a length down in the first minute. Give her a sharp ten ! "

This Guy promptly did, threshing away at the handle with such vigour that he not only restored the situation but over-pumped to such a degree that severe backlash developed in the handle and the overplus of wind blew off through the escape valve with a venomous hiss. At this, Nan smartly opened the swell again—

whereupon Guy, now much fatigued, was once more caught on the wrong foot, and the voluntary once more wavered to a stop with the wail of a deflated bagpipe.

For quite a while Guy and Nan remained locked in this unhappy cycle, alternating abruptly between fair-ground blare and death-chamber keening. But finally they reached a workable balance between in-put and out-take, and the voluntary got properly under way.

Presently the moth-eaten red curtain masking the vestry was drawn aside with a rattle of brass rings, and the choir, followed by Mr. Tucket, processed up the nave to the stalls in the chancel.

Cecil was in the lead, attired in an excessively long cassock of fungoid green serge and a correspondingly brief and grubby surplice reaching scarcely below his armpits. Peering blindly from under his clotted fringe, he stumbled up the aisle, tripping over his voluminous robe at every other pace.

He was closely scotched-up in rear by six giggling young women stuffed into gaudy summer frocks and tottering perilously on four-inch spike heels. Guy intercepted a familiar grin from the middle of the posse and realised that these must be the Turvey sisters in full force.

Mr. Tucket himself was very sprucely turned out, with an Oxford M.A. hood over his robes and a row of medal-ribbons pinned to his scarf. These, Guy was impressed to notice, included a D.C.M. and an M.C. Clearly, Mr. Tucket had done his plonk, and more, in the service of King and country.

It was at once apparent that the Rector was no time-waster. The service went forward at breakneck speed, brevity being plainly the first consideration in the choice of hymns, psalms and lessons. These last

were read by Major Gantrec with all the military briskness to be expected of a quondam ornament of the Venerable Company of Bombardiers.

What with wrestling with his pumping handle, keeping an eye on his wind-gauge and trying to kneel down and stand up in the right places, Guy was kept in a perfect whirl ; and it was not until sermon-time that he had a chance to look about him. His pumping-station was so situated that he was in full view of the congregation, and as he sank down panting in his chair he had an oblique view of Major Gantree's party in the seats below the pulpit.

Some two dozen in number, they were a likely posy indeed : empurpled horsey types with congenitally bowed legs ; sinister old dandies pickled in the fumes of a lifetime's debauchery ; orchidaceous matrons with roving eyes ; exquisite young sprigs from the best regiments ; and a selection of extremely expensive doxies exuding gusts of scent and temperament.

Meanwhile, Mr. Tucket had ascended into the pulpit whence he fixed the congregation with a threatening glare. His text, declaimed in a parade-ground bark, was at once provocative and baffling. Psalm seventy-eight, verse nine, "The children of Ephraim, being armed, and carrying bows, turned back in the day of battle."

Guy was a keen connoisseur of the art of preaching, and he could not help wondering how Mr. Tucket was going to produce an acceptable sermon from such a curious passage. But he speedily realised that he had underrated the Rector's ingenuity and scholarship. Having announced his text, he immediately proceeded to explain that it was a mis-translation, the true intent of the passage being to liken the children of Ephraim to a treacherously constructed bow which

'turned back' in the hands of its user in the day of battle.

Thereafter it was plain sailing. Clearly, for present purposes, the children of Ephraim were Mr. Tucket's own parishioners who, like a treacherous bow, had 'turned back' on him in the day of his battle with Sir Walter Ramage. For a good twenty minutes he developed and rammed home this uncomfortable parallel with a wealth of fancy and a pungency of phrasing that had his audience skewered to their seats. It was a truly virtuoso performance of thinly veiled invective, and when he finally drew to a close, Major Gantree made no bones about showing his approval, breaking the painful silence with a hearty : "Well done, padre ! Hear, hear ! "

The last hymn, fittingly enough, was *Onward Christian Soldiers!*, and Guy and Nan, combining their forces with a will, fairly set the organ bouncing on its foundations. Major Gantree took up the collection, assisted by Cecil who thrice tripped headlong over the skirts of his cassock ; and the service ended at six-forty-five precisely. Pretty smart going, Guy reflected, when one reckoned in the twenty-minute slaughter of the children of Ephraim.

10

AN hour later a very rowdy party was going forward in Major Gantree's small drawing-room. At his urgent invitation, the entire Rectory household had come along to meet his guests, and they were scoring a great social success.

The Rector himself, surrounded by a cluster of hard drinkers of both sexes, was covering himself with glory at the liquor-table. He, it turned out, had soldiered with the Venerable Company of Bombardiers in the First World War, and now he was fuelling-up the company with repeated rounds of Bombards—the notorious head-splitter traditional to the Officers' Mess of that exclusive regiment.

Mrs. Musk had captured the fancy of the local Master of Foxhounds who, perched on the arm of her chair, was entertaining her with a selection of those humorous anecdotes for which he was so justly celebrated. Nan, in the corner behind the piano, was having her bottom pinched by the local M.P., a retired Air Marshal and an amateur steeplechase jockey. Cecil, towering in the middle of the room, was hemmed in by a circle of eager young ladies who were busily feeling his muscles, with murmurs of wistful admiration.

Guy, for his part, had been swooped upon the moment he crossed the threshold by Sukey Grapple, a great big affectionate red-head, the fourth and current wife of a moribund County Court judge. Incarcerating him beside her in the depths of the sofa, she had driven off all competitors with a blunt recommendation to 'Get the hell out of it ! I got him first, and I'm damn-well keeping him.'

The Major, seeing Guy's situation, had felt obliged, as host, to mutter a word of warning in his ear : 'Watch yourself, Random. You've picked the local mustard-pot.' The admonition was, however, superfluous, since Guy had already divined, after no more than fifteen seconds of Mrs. Grapple's conversation, that the local mustard-pot had picked *him*. Furthermore, rampageous young wives were one of the

day-to-day hazards of his profession, and he had a variety of techniques at his finger-tips for dealing with them.

He now determined to apply one of the more elementary sort to his companion. Her charms were undeniable, but her persistent attentions were preventing him from concentrating on a nearby conversation which he urgently wanted to overhear. Intercepting the white-jacketed man-servant, he asked for a tumbler of iced orange-squash. Fifteen seconds later, Mrs. Grapple was en route for the bathroom, exceedingly disgruntled and soaked in orange-squash from waist to kneecaps.

Guy folded his arms, lay back in the sofa and feigned sleep. From behind him, through the buzz of chatter, came the confidential tones of Major Gantree.

" . . . Yes, every single afternoon since this spell of fine weather started. The whole place is thoroughly disorganised. With every able-bodied male roosting in the tree-tops, the farmers can't get their hay in, and work at the ironstone quarries has come to a standstill."

" I'm not surprised, judging by what we saw this afternoon. Who is she, Toby? Come on, now! No secrets between Old Bombardiers."

" I assure you, Jacko, I honestly don't know. All I can tell you is that her name is Mrs. Stain, and that she's taken old Evelyn Chancery's house for three months."

" But haven't you called on her?"

" I've tried to, and so have a lot of other people. But the answer's always the same : *not at home*. There are all sorts of stories going round, of course, but it's all guesswork. She's a complete mystery."

" Very odd. And a great pity, too. I don't mind

admitting that this afternoon's performance properly kindled my tinder, and I can hardly wait to meet her."

" You can take it from me, Jacko, you haven't a hope. The only way to meet Mrs. Stain is to parachute into her back-garden. . . . And now I must ask you to excuse me. I can see that if I don't break up that mob in the corner, poor little Nan won't be able to sit on her sit-upon for the next fortnight. . . . Jolly good luck to you tomorrow, by the way. I hope you make a lot of runs."

" Eh ? What ? "

" Aren't you going a-cricketing for the Elmshire Gentlemen ? I heard you had been chosen as opening batsman."

" Quite right, old boy. But the Elmshire Gentlemen will have to find a substitute. It's not a-cricketing I shall be a-going-of tomorrow—it's a-gandering. Expect me at two-thirty, sharp."

Guy looked at his watch. It was now nine o'clock, and the party was plainly waxing rather than waning. Having started as a mere come-in-for-a-drink-before-supper affair, it was steadily developing into an all-night boozing session. The Major, indeed, had already resigned himself to the fact that his guests were settling-in for an indefinite period, and he was now organising an impromptu cold buffet in the hall. Meanwhile, Mr. Tucket, stripped to his shirt-sleeves, was indefatigably fostering the party spirit with ever more frequent and spine-shattering rounds of Bombards. Repeatedly his genial roar rose above the din of chatter : ' Drink up, drink up ! An empty glass is a standing reproach ! There's plenty more where the last lot came from ! '

Guy got up and sidled towards the french windows. It was a pleasant little gathering, but he had not come

to Dodder-in-the-Bottom to waste his time in social frolicking. On the contrary, this seemed a very suitable moment to press on with the next move in his campaign —a visit to the mysterious Mrs. Stain.

As he edged out into the garden he saw Mrs. Grapple re-entering the room from the hall, her soaked nether-garments now replaced by a very carelessly kilted bath-towel.

"Where's me beamish boy with the saucy grin?" she demanded aggressively. "Where's me sweetie little Guysie-piesic?"

Guy stepped back smartly into the garden and hastened towards the gate. To remain any longer at Major Gantree's party would be not only a waste of time but also extremely foolhardy.

The house stood back from the road behind a dense screen of trees and shrubs. As Guy walked briskly up the neatly gravelled drive, he reconnoitred the elegant façade. The lower windows were wide open, and the door was ajar. Good. The lady was at home. Nor did he intend to be rebuffed like Major Gantree and other unsuccessful callers. He mounted the flight of three steps and, ignoring the bell-push and knocker, walked straight in.

An open doorway on the opposite side of the hall revealed a big square drawing-room softly lighted by a single standard lamp. He crossed the parquet silently on his rubber-soled desert boots and looked inside.

The room was unoccupied, but an oriental cigarette in an ivory holder lay smoking on an ash-tray on the chimney-piece. There was an armchair under the lamp, and beside it a low table littered with magazines and newspapers. Mrs. Stain, it seemed, was enjoying

a quiet Sunday evening. He helped himself to a drink from the cabinet beside the fireplace, lit a Balkan Sobranie from the box on the chimney-piece and extended himself in the spare armchair.

He looked about him, seeking for any odd details which might throw some light on his hostess's personality. Since she was but a temporary tenant, the furnishing and decoration of the room were no help—in fact it was obvious at a single glance that this was the cosy sanctum of a confirmed bachelor. Then he noticed an open book lying on the arm of the vacant chair.

It was a slim, worn volume bound in faded green cloth : *Elmshire Lore and Customs* by Erasmus Tucket, M.A., published by Shamus Skindle, London, 1930. Guy was delighted—just the sort of scholarly little work one would expect from the pen of the Rector of Dodder-in-the-Bottom. The book was open at the final section, entitled 'Glossary of Technical Terms.' His glance fell upon a pencilled asterisk in the margin of the exposed page, and he stepped nearer to the lamp :

GANDER. (Verb and Noun) peer, scrutinise, examine minutely. Hence, have or take *a gander*, i.e. make a close inspection of someone or something. The derivation of this very ancient Elmshire locution is wrapped in obscurity. Various suggestions have been advanced by numerous authorities, but none is wholly satisfactory. The present writer's theory is that the term derives, quite simply, from the common farmyard fowl of that name. A notable characteristic of this creature, it will be recalled, is the telescopic extrusion of its neck in rigid elongation when excited : a gesture very typical of one who is peering or scrutinising (as above). It should be emphasised that the term has slightly doubtful overtones, and so should be avoided in polite conversation.

Guy nodded thoughtfully to himself and blew a leisurely cloud of smoke through his nostrils. And

then, as he replaced the book on the chair arm, he made another interesting find. A picture postcard fell from between the leaves onto the coffee-table. It had a Spanish stamp on it, and the picture was a photograph of the humorous variety in which the subject's face appears above a fancy-dress costume cut out of cardboard.

In this case the costumes represented were those of a matador and a female flamenco dancer ; and the faces attached were those of two of the choicest blooms of the smart cosmopolitan world in which Guy customarily operated : Messrs. Basil Chancery and Henry Salt. He turned the card over to read the inscription. ‘ Darling Laura, Aren’t we a pair of old sillies ! Love, B. and H.’

“ *Good evening, Mr. Random.*”

He deliberately tapped the ash off his cigarette into the tray before turning to look at her. And, when he did, his lips parted in the celebrated flashing grin. It was the gorgeous creature who had tried to pick him up in the restaurant-car on the train to Elderbury.

He placed his hand on his heart and bowed. “ Your servant, Mrs. Stain. This is indeed an unexpected pleasure.”

“ On the contrary. I’ve been awaiting your arrival all the evening.”

“ Indeed ? I understood that you were not-at-home to visitors.”

She shrugged. “ I’m not, as a rule. But experience has taught me never to waste time and energy opposing the inevitable.”

“ You choose to speak in riddles.”

She stepped into the full light of the lamp. “ I was merely referring to your reputation for arranging matters—which led me to suspect that you would

interpret not-at-home as a pressing invitation to make yourself at home. It seems I was right."

She crossed to the liquor-cabinet and set about mixing herself a solid pink gin. "Do sit down, won't you—or perhaps you haven't quite finished reading my correspondence yet."

"Thank you, I've finished all that seems to be available at the moment."

He watched her appreciatively as she brought her drink across and sat down in the armchair opposite to him. She was wearing a shortish flaring skirt of black glazed cotton and a crocus-yellow shirt of the same stuff with a black spatter-design of nougats and crosses. She wore only the slightest *maquillage* and no jewellery.

Under the exquisite grooming and cool elegance there was something intensely feline about her: the pelt-like gloss of her copper hair, the expressionless stare of her lambent emerald eyes, the slow absent-minded grace of her movements. Her whole bearing, indeed, was marked by a cat's detached indifference to the presence of a stranger, an indifference which amounted to an insult in the blatant thrust of her nipples and the careless exhibition of thigh in crossing her legs—an exhibition of which she must be aware but which she made no attempt to veil, disdaining the self-consciously coquettish gesture of pulling down her skirt.

She raised her glass. "Good health, Mr. Random. And welcome to Dodder-in-the-Bottom."

"Thank you. And, clearly, you have the advantage of me. Very much so, in fact. I find it rather provoking."

"No doubt. But professional men of your eminence can hardly expect to remain unidentified." She laid

a hand on the pile of magazines. "You photograph very well, you know. Even by flashlight in smoky night-traps with incandescent blondes clambering all over you."

She picked up the postcard. "Besides, as you see, we have common acquaintances."

Guy nodded. "Yes. Basil Chancery and Henry Salt. But it's a year or more since we worked together. I should hardly have expected . . ."

"Come, come, you're too modest. Your personality seems to make a lasting impression on all who cross your path. I can assure you that both Basil and Henry refer to you frequently, especially in connection with that little affair of *The Tears of Venus* down on the Costa Brava last summer."

"Obligingly, I trust?"

"In terms of the warmest affection and esteem."

"I can hardly wait."

"If I remember aright, they unite in describing you as 'just about the smoothest bastard that ever set foot in shoe-leather.'"

"The dear boys. I often wonder what they're doing these days."

"Oh, they're still working as secret agents for that super-hush-hush outfit run by Myra Sheath. In fact, they've just gone off on another mission to the Middle East—though they seem to have got diverted by passing fancies, as usual."

"I see you're familiar with their little weaknesses. You know them well?"

"I've been—keeping house for them."

"I see."

She sipped her gin and fitted a fresh cigarette into her holder. "I started with Basil. Then Henry and his Jenny decided to part as they couldn't afford the

crockery for their arguments ; after which Henry moved in with us. They're a charming pair of boys, and always seemed most grateful for all I did for them. Unfortunately, however, one can't live on gratitude."

"The arrangement is terminated, then ? "

She sighed and shook her head. "You know how it is : when the duns come in at the door, love flies out at the window. A pity. We were so happy together. I shall never forget those long cosy winter evenings, roasting chestnuts and playing snakes-and-ladders. How the pets cheated."

"And now ? "

"Basil's uncle has lent me this house, rent free, for three months. In the meantime I shall look around for another . . . situation."

"That shouldn't be difficult."

"Thank you. But I'm afraid I'm rather hard to suit, as the saying goes. Thirty-eight is a difficult age —the age of the cleft-stick."

"Yes ? "

"Well, you know how it is : on the one hand an increasing taste for charming juveniles, on the other an increasing need for solid comfort. Unfortunately, the two so rarely seem to go together. One can't have the best of both worlds, alas."

"Oh, come, Mrs. Stain. You, surely, have always had the best of both worlds—of every possible world, indeed. I make no mention of having your cake and eating it—though, no doubt, yours would be a *gâteau*."

She interrupted him with a sudden ripple of laughter, surprising and delicious in its gay spontaneity. "You must forgive my pessimistic mood. I got a statement of account from my bank yesterday, and was foolish enough to look at it."

"Most unwise. So apt to cramp the style. However, you still have the black Bristol. And a personal maid."

"An overdraft is no excuse for slumming. One must try to keep up appearances."

"Nor must we forget that most valuable of all assets: the spirit of free enterprise. I greatly appreciated your kind invitation to luncheon yesterday."

"One must try to divert oneself."

She leaned forward and crushed out her cigarette with a quick, impatient movement, momentarily enveloping him in the savage aroma of her flesh plus a hot spicy scent which he identified approvingly as Baudelaire's *Madrigal Triste*.

"But I'm forgetting my manners," she said, "talking about myself all the time. Basil and Henry will be most interested to hear that you're thinking of taking Holy Orders."

"You keep in touch, I notice—in spite of receiving no visitors."

"I subscribe to the village bush-telegraph system, through Mrs. Tattle, the daily help. It costs a good deal in Evelyn's whisky; but one likes to be well informed on local trends."

"So it seems."

She followed his glance to the copy of *Elmshire Lore and Customs* lying on the arm of her chair.

"Of course. How quick and thorough you are, to be sure."

She picked the book up and tapped the asterisked paragraph with a delicate white forefinger. "An interesting theory that Mr. Tucket advances, don't you think?"

"Very."

"I particularly like this bit about the 'telescopic

extrusion of the neck in rigid elongation.' Though I must say it sounds extremely uncomfortable, even dangerous."

She raised her eyes from the page and gave him her blank, cat's stare. "I have an excellent prescription which I can strongly recommend in all cases of wrenched joints and strained muscles."

He nodded approvingly. "So you spotted me. Nicc work."

"There's no need to reproach yourself. It just so happens that I've got that particular ganderstand pin-pointed, and know where to look."

"All the same, you must have excellent eyesight."

"Oh, I don't pretend that I recognised you personally. I merely noticed that somebody was up there, and put two and two together."

"Yes?"

"Sir Walter Ramage, the usual incumbent, I knew to be in Scotland for the week-end. So when I heard from Mrs. Tattle that you'd been seen going into the church this afternoon . . ."

"I'm disappointed. I'd hoped to give the impression that I was going there for a period of spiritual meditation."

"And so you did. Indeed, I can assure you that the village at large is greatly impressed by your ascetic air and the sober gravity of your demeanour. Mrs. Tattle herself goes so far as to describe you as 'a wunnerful 'oly young feller 'oo 'as subdued the Owd Adam in 'is 'eart and trampled the lusts o' the flesh under 'is feet.' It was only I, alas, who suspected you were otherwise engaged. I fear I have a somewhat ungenerous mind."

"On the contrary. All the evidence goes to show that you have a most generous disposition—almost to

a fault, in fact. I think you ought to know that you are seriously interfering with the hay harvest, and that work at the ironstone quarries has come to a standstill."

"So I believe. But I really can't bring myself to disappoint my public—especially since they've all started buying expensive binoculars and building little nests in the trees. Major Gantree's, I understand, is a real beauty."

"It is. I've reconnoitred it. But Sir Walter and I enjoy a superior elevation and a sharper definition of detail. I can't speak for the others, of course."

She gazed meditatively into her glass. "My information is that there are six ganders in active use at the moment, and a dozen more in an advanced state of construction. But I think there's no doubt, as you say, that Sir Walter's has the edge on them all. May I ask, by the way, how you spotted him? I may say that you're the only one who has, apart from myself."

"Pure chance. I was reclining behind a tombstone in the graveyard yesterday afternoon when he came off duty. And you?"

"Also pure chance. I was doing my exercises at the time; and, happening to glance backwards between my legs, I saw a head shoot up above the parapet. Very careless."

"But very understandable."

"So I sent my maid off on a reconnaissance. She concealed herself in the cassock-cupboard in the vestry and saw him come sneaking down. He seems to take a guilty enjoyment in juvenile pleasures, like so many tough businessmen. I suppose it is because they all tend to be mentally arrested adolescents."

"Come, come! You embarrass me."

She gave him the first smile, and it stopped his pulse. It was a sudden dazzling radiance of frank, child-like gaiety.

"No offence, Mr. Random, I assure you. After all, a Negotiator is an artist, not a businessman ; and for you, I'm quite certain that gandering is work, not pleasure."

"Why should you think that ? "

"Because you've followed it up by coming to call on me."

"Might it not be that I hoped for even more poignant pleasures ? "

"I think it unlikely ; for I understand that Random never blends work with pleasure—however poignant. Basil and Henry used to emphasise the fact repeatedly, with all the wistful admiration of those who never blend pleasure with work."

Guy sighed and shook his head. "I fear that you, at any rate, are not impressed by my role of intending candidate for Holy Orders."

"No."

"Very discouraging. I thought I was carrying it off rather well."

"To one familiar with your reputation, Mr. Random, you're right out of character."

"How so ? "

"Surely it's obvious. According to my information, if you were really looking for spiritual guidance you wouldn't attach yourself to an obscure country parson —you'd hire an Archbishop."

She exhaled a cloud of smoke and watched it intently. "I don't pretend to know what the matter is that you have to come to Dodder to *arrange* ; but I shall be most interested to watch you arranging it."

"Perhaps you would care to assist me."

" You overwhelm me."

" Nevertheless, I beg you to give it your earnest consideration. The cause is worthy ; and there could be money in it. A lot."

" What should I be required to do ? "

" Just exercise your natural talents."

" They are very limited, I'm afraid."

" But very highly developed."

She lay back in her chair and pondered the tip of her cigarette. Her imperturbable aplomb aroused his keenest admiration.

" You find the suggestion unattractive, I fear."

" On the contrary. But I'm just wondering whether we should work smoothly together."

" I have no doubt about it. In fact, I feel perfectly certain that we should find ourselves in the closest harmony and the warmest accord ; for we are both activated by that loftiest of all motives : the promotion of human happiness. As a professional Negotiator, that is my sole concern. And, judging by what I was privileged to see this afternoon, I am satisfied that it is also yours."

She watched him detachedly through the smoke haze, coolly and unhurriedly weighing him up. Then she swallowed the last of her drink and quietly set down her glass.

" Since you put it like that, Mr. Random, I feel that I can't possibly refuse your offer. Indeed, it is clearly my duty to accept."

11

SIR WALTER RAMAGE was richly endowed with the two chief qualities necessary for making a vast fortune : a chronic sense of inferiority and terrific nervous energy. The former showed itself in a ruthless will to power, the crudely obvious kind of power obtainable only from great wealth. The latter enabled him to work the requisite twenty hours a day, year in and year out.

In addition to these two qualities, alone sufficient for big money-making, he enjoyed sundry other advantages : quick wits and no intelligence ; an excellent memory and no education. He smoked little and drank no alcohol at all. He had never read a book for pleasure.

His weaknesses were those common to his kind. Basically unsure of himself, he showed his authority by brow-beating and insults. He fancied himself a keen judge of character, but was in fact an extremely poor one, for, like all egomaniacs, he measured everyone by his own standards. Hence he equated shrewdness with rudeness, and naïvely assumed that pleasant manners meant a softy.

Apart from his work he virtually ceased to exist. He had no hobbies and played no games except an occasional Sunday morning round of golf for business purposes. His recognition of the arts was limited to a juvenile passion for conjuring displays and the nuder type of musical comedy. He was a keen collector of mechanical knick-knacks such as complicated cuckoo-clocks and tune-playing toilet-rolls.

But his chief weakness was in his dealings with the opposite sex. His basic sense of inferiority was always particularly acute in the presence of a stylish and well-bred woman ; and his habitual reaction was a cheeky over-familiarity, followed by surly resentment when he got the deserved snub. He therefore customarily restricted his female relationships to passing tumbles with flashy pick-ups on his business trips abroad ; or to fumbling flirtations with junior employees whom his wealth and position allowed him to patronise, and amongst whom he was popularly known as Old Peckaboo by reason of his eager eye for chance glimpses of thighs and bosoms.

Nevertheless, it was the elegant *femmes du monde* he really coveted, and it was one such that he had in fact married in the person of Lucy Vervain. It had proved a most unhappy venture. Misled by her fragile loveliness and beautiful manners, he had tried to bully and dominate her, whereupon she had unveiled a ruthless toughness at least the equal of his own, finally walking out on him after unloading a blistering packet of home-truths regarding his uncertain breeding, intellectual destitution and connubial inadequacies.

That last deadly summing-up had never ceased to rankle, and now, seventeen years afterwards, the memory of it still filled him with chagrin and rage. But the exquisite Lucy had left him a still bitterer legacy in her infant son Julian—a son who, as the years rolled by, Sir Walter increasingly suspected was not his own.

This atrocious notion, never far absent from his mind, was plaguing him anew this Tuesday morning as he sat in his study sorting his papers before going to preside over a local County Council meeting.

Through his window he could see Julian standing on the lawn, carefully fitting a dark red clove carnation into the buttonhole of his grey flannel suit. For the thousandth time Sir Walter scrutinised the slim, graceful figure, the sensitive features, the wealth of black wavy hair. And for the thousandth time he grimly recorded the fact that though there were strong reminders of Lucy in the young man's appearance, there were none whatsoever of himself. On the other hand, there were very strong reminders indeed of that insolent playwright who, twenty years ago, had spent the summer with Evelyn Chancery, writing a play which had subsequently made him a fortune.

At this point, as always, Sir Walter broke out of his unhappy reflections into violent action. He wrenched open the window and barked savagely across the lawn.

"Hey, you there ! Why the hell aren't you at the office ? "

" You wish to speak to me, sir ? "

" I *am* speaking to you. And I want to know what the devil you mean by hanging about the house at half-past ten in the morning. I suppose you think that just because I'm boss of the outfit *you* can turn up for work just when you feel like it."

" Well, it's certainly a point of view, now you come to mention it."

Sir Walter was on the point of a thorough-going explosion when he caught a glimpse of that something in Julian's bearing which never failed to throw him off balance. Under the boy's elaborate courtesy there was a trace of that cool, insolent derision, that detached contempt which had been Lucy's most devastating weapon. He swallowed convulsively and his hands locked on the window-frame.

" Well, what've you got to say for yourself ? "

"I shall be moving off presently. I've only just had breakfast. You see, I was up very late last night, busy with my writing."

"Writing! What writing?"

Julian sniffed the carnation in his buttonhole.

"Well, actually, sir, I'm having a go at a play. It's shaping rather nicely. In fact, I seem to have quite a knack for it."

When Sir Walter at last found his tongue he spoke in a creaking rasp. "Get down to that office at once! Do you hear me? And don't let me catch you loafing about the house again at this time of day; otherwise you'll be in for another cut in your pay-packet. And another thing . . ."

"Sir?"

"Get hold of Tappet before you leave and tell him to get the Daimler round to the door double-quick. He's another who seems to think that any time'll do. He'll be getting himself the sack one of these fine days if he doesn't smarten his ideas up."

"I'm afraid, sir, that Tappet isn't here this morning."

"Where the hell is he, then?"

"I understand he's had some kind of accident and been removed to hospital. And Waghorn, too, I believe, is in similar plight—which is most unfortunate with the flower-show coming on next week. It looks as if Major Gantree will sweep the board again."

A little later Sir Walter was interviewing his house-keeper, Mrs. Spindle, whom he had engaged when his wife deserted him and whom he had systematically over-worked and under-paid for the past seventeen years.

"What's all this, Ellen, about Waghorn and Tappet being off work? No gardener, no chauffeur. . . .

Has the whole damn staff packed up? The next thing'll be no cook, I suppose."

"Yes, sir."

"What do you mean, yes-sir?"

"Mrs. Clatter is laid-by, sir. It seems as how she's had a very nasty tumble downstairs and won't be fit for work for several days—which is very awkward, sir, especially with all these important business gentlemen coming to dinner tonight."

"Awkward! It's a lot of bloody nonsense, that's what it is. What's come over the place? Is the whole damn village on the sick-list?"

"Well, sir, I understand that there's been a lot of trouble this morning. Fighting and carrying-on alarming, the milkman just told me—"

She broke off to point through the window. "Look, sir, there's the policeman just coming up the drive now. No doubt he'll be able to tell you more about it."

At ten o'clock the Tucket household were still sitting round the breakfast-table. For the past half-hour, sustained by repeated cups of fierce syrupy tea, they had been gummed to their seats by their first encounter with the real Guy Random—Random the professional Negotiator actively engaged in arranging matters.

The Rector lit yet another pipeful of rank shag and looked thoughtfully across the table at Guy who was sprawling in his chair, valeting Byron's whiskers with an ivory-backed moustache-brush.

"H'm. So that's what they call it: gandering. A very interesting use of the term—and very appropriate, too, it seems. I must say, Random, you don't let much grass grow under your feet when you get started."

Guy shrugged modestly. "Just a matter of keeping

one's eyes and ears open, sir. The whole village is seething with it. I'm surprised you haven't heard."

"Quite so. But since the bulk of my parishioners rated on me and went over to Sir Walter Ramage I've severed all connection with the village—apart, of course, from holding the statutory minimum of services. As for Mrs. Stain, I have been intending to call on her and pay my respects, since she's a friend of dear old Evelyn Chancery; but what with all this worry about the Gumption Charity Fund and so forth, I've never got around to it. I've been missing something, apparently."

"Too true," said Nan. "I've seen her once or twice, flashing hither and yon in that black Bristol, and she's a proper bone-melter and no error. However, according to Toby Gantree, she doesn't receive any callers. Very stand-offish like."

Guy put aside the moustache-brush and fell to polishing Byron's coat with a silk handkerchief. "On the contrary. I had the pleasure of spending an hour with her on Sunday night, and found her extremely friendly."

"Well, stuff me gently with a——"

"Come, Nan," protested the Rector, "kindly moderate your language. Remember, there are gentlemen present. This is most interesting, Random. You found her agreeable, you say?"

"Not only agreeable, sir, but uncommonly cooperative. As a matter of fact, she's agreed to preside at your magic-lantern lecture tomorrow evening."

The silence was broken by the prim voice of Mrs. Musk. "And now, I fancy, we could all do with another nice strong pot of tea."

Presently Guy was in full spate. ". . . So I made up my mind that the lecture must still take place, in

spite of Sir Walter and village Hall committee. Firstly, because it is essential to make up that deficiency in the Gumption Charity Fund before Saturday. Secondly, because we shall strike a telling blow at Sir Walter's local prestige. By securing the patronage of Mrs. Stain we are well on the way to success. It is clear that her fame has spread far beyond the boundaries of Dodder-in-the-Bottom ; and, unless I'm much mistaken, the public at large will be eager to see her at close quarters. So I've made my arrangements accordingly."

" Your arrangements, Random ? "

" Yes, sir. Everything is laid on." He picked up a bulky parcel lying by his chair. " I got the local printer in Elderbury to rush these off for me yesterday afternoon. Rather tasty, I feel."

He unpacked a bundle of brilliant scarlet and yellow posters, holding a copy up for inspection. " There you are. All the essential details : *Rhapsody in Black*, as previously advertised, will now take place at Dodder-in-the-Bottom Rectory at 10.30 p.m. on Wednesday. I've timed it late to catch the boozing public after the pubs close. And here you see the big kick : Under the Distinguished Patronage of Mrs. L. Stain. . . . That, I fancy, should assure you of a full house, Mr. Tucket. And a satisfactory collection, too ; especially as Mrs. Stain has kindly agreed to receive the offerings personally."

" But where are we going to put 'em all ? " protested Nan. " We could pack a fair number into the coach-house, I suppose ; or we could squeeze a hundred or so into the granary at the back end of the north wing. . . ."

" Don't worry about the accommodation," replied Guy. " I've arranged with the leading firm of caterers

in Elderbury to erect their biggest marquise on the front lawn. They'll be coming along this afternoon to put the thing up."

He glanced at his watch. "And now it's high time we got moving. I want to have these posters on display in every village in the district before this evening."

A quarter of an hour later, equipped with a substantial picnic luncheon, Nan and Guy set off on an all-day publicity tour.

Nan was riding a very flashy lightweight sports-bike glittering with purple enamel and fitted with straight handlebars, white plastic mudguards and multiple gears. Clad in a bib-and-bloomer sun-suit and a pair of espadrilles, she made a pretty picture indeed as she pedalled along with her cap of curls fluttering in the hot summer breeze.

Following somewhat uncertainly in her slipstream came Guy, mounted on the Rector's tricycle. He, too, made an eye-catching spectacle, having dressed himself against the heat in a suit of Mr. Tucket's tattered tussore tropicals, three sizes too big, and a moth-riddled deerstalker hat. And since the Rector scorned such finicking refinements as trouser-clips, Guy had been obliged to tether his trouser ends with wisps of binder-twine, an arrangement which combined strikingly with his canary yellow socks and brown suede desert boots.

Moreover, he was carrying a considerable assortment of luggage. The customary stack of gas-cylinders had been removed from the iron rack in rear and replaced by a luncheon basket, a massive oblong hamper typical of the generous feeding habits of the Tucket household. The second item, thoughtfully provided by the Rector at the last moment, was a capacious wicker stick-and-umbrella holder, containing a red silk parasol, attached

by straps to the front forks. The third item was Byron, who reclined drowsily on the wooden book-rest affixed to the handlebars.

As he treadled down the lane, behind Nan, Guy could not help wondering if he had been wise in so airily accepting the loan of Mr. Tucket's machine. It was many a long year since he had ridden even a bicycle ; and he had done no triking since the age of five. In consequence he found himself sadly out of practice in the special techniques needed for the mastery of three wheels—especially when cornering at speed. Twice already he had nearly come a nasty purler : first when descending the ramp in the porch, and again in turning out of the drive into the lane when he had found himself suddenly whirling round in a complete circle, poised on his offside rear wheel only.

Furthermore, he was greatly impeded in his manoeuvres by Mr. Tucket's numerous ingenious gadgets. The rubber bulb of the squeeze-horn constantly bumped against his right knee ; and the wicker stick-holder on the front forks showed an alarming tendency to jam the steering solid whenever he tried to turn the front wheel to the right. But the greatest hazard was the remote-control string reins dangling from the hand-grips. These depended centrally in a treacherous loop in which he had already several times ensnared his feet just at the point of maximum down-thrust—being thereby savagely jerked up out of his saddle and all but flung headlong over the handlebars.

As they approached the end of the lane, Nan looked back over her shoulder and gave him an encouraging grin. " Stick to it, Random ! You're doing fine. You'll soon get into the swing of the thing. Just relax and take it easy. That's the secret."

Much encouraged, Guy enjoyed a sudden surge of confidence. So much so, indeed, that on reaching the turning into the village he triumphantly grasped the bulb-horn and tore off three rousing honks.

But his vaulting ambition had overleaped itself. His frolicsome fanfare momentarily diverted his attention from the road and he failed to notice a gaping pot-hole in the left-hand gutter. His near-side rear wheel dropped into it with a bitter crash and the machine side-slipped perilously. Caught unawares, Guy sought to correct by thrusting violently on the right-hand pedal—only to have his foot savagely arrested half-way through its revolution by the pendent reins. Simultaneously, by equal and opposite reaction, the handlebars were wrenched round onto full right-lock where they were irremediably jammed by the wicker stick-holder. Thereupon the entire machine pivoted over on the right rear wheel and crashed to the ground, pinning Guy underneath.

When at last he managed to wrench the deerstalker off the bridge of his nose and regain his sight, his first thought was for Byron. And Byron's first thought, he was touched to discover, had been for him. The handsome creature was standing immediately adjacent to his right ear, peering down into his face with an unmistakable expression of sympathy in its yellow jewelled eyes.

Nan, meanwhile, had turned around, dismounted and propped her bicycle against the hedge. Advancing to the scene of the accident, she looked down at Guy's recumbent body with mingled pity and exasperation, her legs astride, her hands planted on her hips.

"This is what comes of showing-off," she observed.
"When I told you to relax, I didn't mean you to try and loop-the-loop on the bloody thing."

In due course, Guy remounted, followed by Byron, who this time prudently installed himself on the luncheon hamper over the back axle, clearly having decided that his previous perch on the reading-desk was unduly hazardous. Nan, after delivering a pungent homily on the follies of reckless triking, vaulted onto her own machine and they resumed their journey. But not for long.

When they entered the village Nan suddenly pulled into the kerb and signalled to Guy to stop. She nodded ahead down the street.

"There's something cooking. I wonder what's to do."

In spite of his preoccupation with the unpredictable whims of his vehicle, Guy, too, realised that something unusual was toward. The entire population of Dodder-in-the-Bottom appeared to be thoroughly on the buzz. Some were gathered in clusters at the gateways, nattering and gesticulating regardless. Others, singly or in pairs, were hurrying along the pathways or darting feverishly from group to group. The focus of interest seemed to be a row of thatched cottages outside which stood two cars and a motor-cycle.

"This looks promising," said Nan. "The doctor, the district nurse *and* the policeman . . . oh, I say! Come on!"

A motor-ambulance flashed past them and halted at the centre cottage, with Nan in close pursuit. Guy treadled after her, honking diligently on his bulb-horn as he tried to force his way through the throng of spectators surging across the road.

Abandoning their machines on the grass verge, they finally elbowed their way into the front row in time to see the stretcher-bearers emerge from the doorway carrying a blanket-shrouded figure with an impressively

bandaged head. A morbid silence enveloped the company whilst the constable cleared a passage for the stretcher, superintended its loading onto the ambulance and closed the doors.

He was signalling the driver to move off when there was another sensation. A volley of appalling screams jetted from a house on the opposite side of the road, followed by a cascade of foul language and the crash of splintering crockery. As the onlookers swung round in their tracks, gaping towards the new seat of disturbance, a commodious china chamber-pot soared through an open upstairs window and shattered into fragments on the pavement.

The constable started forward, then wheeled about and raised his hand to the ambulance-driver.

"'old it, mate ! Looks like you've got another customer. The way things are goin', you'd better get a shuttle-service organised."

Hemmed in on all sides by the viewing public, he advanced sombrely across the road to investigate. But he was frustrated by yet another diversion. There was a fresh outburst of anguished yells, this time from a point some two hundred yards away on the right flank, where a puny male figure was to be observed galloping in the direction of the duck-pond. His progress was expedited by a robustly fashioned woman in curling-pins and combinations, whirling a butcher's cleaver round her head.

As they vanished around a bend in the road, the crowd jostled, broke apart and set off in pursuit. A few seconds later a resounding splash indicated that the quarry had sought sanctuary in the fetid quagmire. Another, still more resounding, indicated that he had sought it in vain.

Nan was all for racing off to witness the progress of

the hunt, but Guy restrained her, counselling a quick getaway before they found themselves involved as witnesses in the lurid legal proceedings which must certainly follow these unbridled manifestations of rustic emotion.

They were pedalling away towards the outskirts of the village when they met Major Gantree debouching from a pathway towards his bungalow. He greeted them with joyful flourishes of his ashplant.

"Lots of fun and no harm done ! I was up for the kill, but the crafty beggar went to ground in a culvert and she couldn't get at him with the hatchet. Got jammed by the hams in the orifice, and they're still trying to winch her out. Come in for a snifter. This morning's work calls for a celebration."

Having dispensed the gin with an even more liberal hand than usual, the Major joined Nan in the sofa. ". . . Yes, that's the tally to date. Four in hospital, six confined to bed, and a dozen at least under treatment for minor injuries. The police and medical services have been properly run off their feet. I've never seen the like—tossing one another over the banisters, crowning each other with chamber-pots, and now a bout of hubby-hunting with the meat-chopper."

"But what's come over them all ?" insisted Nan.
"That's what I want to know."

"It seems," said the Major, peering reflectively into his gin, "that it all started with a number of exceedingly offensive anonymous letters which arrived by this morning's post. Some two dozen households received them, I understand ; and, in every case, apparently, the allegations were the same : seasonable activities in Tickle-Fancy Spinney."

"Oh."

"Yes."

There was a dead-pan pause. Guy joined the tips of his fingers and gazed judicially at the ceiling. "And judging by the violence of the reactions, one assumes that the allegations were tolerably accurate."

"Quite so, Random. Or tolerably probable, at any rate."

"Extraordinary!"

"Not at all, my dear fellow. In view of the local popularity of Tickle-Fancy Spinney, almost any allegation aenent the activities therein is tolerably probable—if not a stone-cold certainty."

There was another pause.

"But there's something that is rather extraordinary," mused the Major.

"Yes?"

"I refer to the recipients of the letters. They all belong to that odious clique that infest the Dropped Clanger—Sir Walter Ramage's gang, in fact. After this morning's work he'll find himself deprived of half his hangers-on, including the bulk of his indoor and outdoor staff. Very gratifying. Nor must we forget the bitter blow to his self-esteem. As a Deputy Lieutenant and a Magistrate and all the rest of it, he won't exactly relish a spectacular outbreak of mob violence on his own private preserves."

"He'll probably manage to hush it all up," said Nan. "He's got plenty of local pull."

"I hardly think so," replied the Major. "I dodged into the telephone-box just now and had a word with my pal Jacko Galway-Blazer who owns the *Elderbury Chronicle*. They're putting a reporter and a photographer on the job right away. I don't doubt we shall be in the national dailies tomorrow morning."

He looked up with a roguish grin. "Well, there it

is. Just the dose of salts that this place has been needing for a very long time. I must say I'd like to know who wrote those anonymous letters. The author deserves the heartiest congratulations." He raised his glass. "Jolly good luck to whoever it is!"

He tossed back his gin and looked across reproachfully at Guy. "Come, Random, you're not toasting!"

Guy held up his empty glass. "Sorry. I'm out of fuel. Always was a quick drinker."

"Not to mention a quick thinker," murmured the Major, reaching again for the bottle.

At half-past eleven they got into the saddle again and set off along the winding lane leading to the main road. On Nan's advice, Guy abandoned his gutter-crawling and adopted Mr. Tucket's principle of riding slap down the middle of the fairway, thereby avoiding the lateral drift occasioned by the surface camber. This method proved most helpful, and he soon gained such a mastery over his machine that he was able to venture upon occasional snatches of conversation.

He was modestly acknowledging Nan's glowing compliments on the success of his anonymous-letter gambit when he was rudely disturbed by the furious blast of a motor-horn in the rear. And before he had time to edge off the crown of the road, a superb Daimler saloon shaved by his right elbow, swung savagely across his bows and halted immediately in front of him. The face of Sir Walter Ramage, suffused with choler, glowered back at him from the driver's window.

"Come here, you!"

"Insolent brute," muttered Nan. "Tell him to take a running jump at himself."

But she was gravely disappointed. To her disgust

and chagrin, Guy dismounted from his tricycle and obediently padded forward with an ingratiating smile.

"Yes, sir?"

"What the hell do you mean by riding that damn thing all over the road like that?"

"I'm extremely sorry, sir. . . ."

"Sorry! Sorry! I should bloody well think so, too. Don't you know the elementary rules of the road?"

"I'm afraid I wasn't thinking what I was doing. . . ."

"Then you'd better start thinking, and smarten your ideas up. Otherwise you'll find yourself in front of the Bench with a thundering good fine slapped on you. It's half-baked nincompoops like you who cause all the accidents. I've a damn good mind to report you and see you get something you won't forget in a hurry!"

Guy's attitude, already fawning, became positively cringing. "Really, sir, I do hope you'll be good enough to overlook it this time. I admit that I was entirely in the wrong, and I most sincerely regret it. I promise you that I won't let anything of the kind occur again. This has been a very sharp lesson to me, and I shan't forget it."

"Well, just see that you don't forget it," replied Sir Walter, "or you'll find yourself in trouble. I don't know who you are, or where you come from, but you'd better understand that in this part of the world rules and regulations are made to be obeyed—or else!"

Obviously mollified by Guy's grovelling behaviour, he drew his head back into the car and prepared to move on. "All right, you can clear off now. But just watch out that I don't catch you doing the same thing again; or I promise you I'll make it hot for you."

With this he shot away in a cloud of dust and pebbles.

Guy turned round to find Nan regarding him with a blend of bewilderment and revulsion.

"Well, upon my soul ! Of all the sickening displays of spaniel-type boot-licking ! What the devil came over you ? About the only thing you didn't do was go down on your belly in the dust and beseech him to spit in your eye."

Guy pushed his machine back onto the crown of the road and remounted. "Tranquillise yourself, Miss Tucket. Things are not always what they seem."

"Indeed ? And what do you mean by that, pray ? "

"I mean that the hardest lesson the professional Negotiator has to learn is to control his emotions. The natural passions must at all times be governed by the brain. It is often very difficult ; and frequently, as just now, extremely mortifying. But patience is always rewarded in the end. The mills of Random may sometimes grind slowly, but they always grind exceeding fine."

"Very interesting, I'm sure," snarled Nan. "But all I can say is, I'm sorry he didn't tackle me. By the time I'd finished with him he'd have wished he'd kept his mouth shut."

"And by the time *I've* finished with him," replied Guy, "he'll wish that a millstone had been hung about his neck and that he had been cast into the uttermost depths of the sea."

After these mishaps and interruptions they at last got clear of the village and resumed their publicity tour. Nan had plotted a circular course taking in all the principal villages within a six-mile radius : St. Firkin Without, St. Bodkin Within and St. Napkin-all-Round ; Twitchit Anterior, Scratchit Posterior and Fidget Between ; the Podders both Superior and Inferior ; the Pittles both Great and Little ; and Widdling-on-the-Wold.

It was a punishing route, some thirty miles in length, fraught with much stiff hill-work, several spine-shattering short-cuts along deeply rutted cart-tracks, and a number of scarcely navigable fords.

These last were a source of considerable satisfaction to Guy, for here his tricycle, with its greater stability, had the advantage over Nan's sports-bike. Moreover, his mastery of the techniques of soft-sand driving, acquired in desert warfare, now stood him in good stead. By maintaining a cautious but steady pace throughout, he avoided plunging into submerged potholes or digging himself down into mud patches by overly fierce acceleration.

Nan, on the other hand, was all for splash-and-dash methods, charging the water hazards at full throttle and trusting to her initial momentum to carry her over all obstacles to the other side. In spite of Guy's repeated warnings, she persisted in this system, taunting him with excessive caution, nervous debility and general poltroonery.

But half-way between Great and Little Pittle, Guy had his revenge. Here their route obliged them to ford a sizable stream with an appreciable current. Nan, as usual, put her head down, accelerated to maximum velocity and shot into the water with shrill cries of delight. Midway, however, she had the misfortune to embed her front wheel in a patch of quick-sand—whereupon her machine whirled upwards in its entirety on the fulcrum of its locked front axle, catapulting her plinth over capital into the drink.

Her language was a real pleasure to listen to ; nor was her temper improved by Guy's suggestion, as he treaded sedately up the opposite bank, that they whistle up a couple of tugs with a view to refloating her at the next high tide.

As it was now nearly three o'clock they decided to halt for luncheon, having made excellent progress with their task of publicising Mr. Tucket's lantern-lecture. Nan was clearly a very popular figure in local society, and they had had no difficulty at all in getting their posters displayed at strategic points in every village they had visited. Mr. Tucket's brother clerics had proved wonderfully helpful, and the shopkeepers and publicans had readily undertaken to bring the lecture to the attention of their clients.

They trundled their machines into an adjacent meadow and parked them in a secluded corner by the edge of the stream.

Having roused Byron from his afternoon nap, Guy unstrapped the luncheon hamper and set about brewing tea on the portable spirit-stove. Nan, meanwhile, stripped off her sun-suit and spread it on the grass to dry. Tanned a uniform *café au lait* from top to toe, she made a very agreeable eyeful : a fine big girl indeed.

She joined him on the rug and busied herself setting out the picnic.

"One can't be too careful about sitting around in damp clothes," she observed. "We Tuckets, as a family, are extremely prone to chills."

Half an hour later they were supine on the rug in the full glare of the afternoon sun. Byron, stupefied with cold chicken and iced hock—a beverage to which he was greatly addicted—sprawled between them, as if filleted, in the last luxurious extremity of feline relaxation.

Presently Nan sat up with an impatient jerk and avidly lit a cigarette, thereby rudely disturbing her companion's siesta.

"Can't you keep still for two hours together?"

protested Guy. "What the hell's the matter with you?"

"What do you think!"

"Oh, dear. I see."

"It's awful. You've no idea."

"You must try to be a big brave girl and think of other things."

"I can't."

"Then I advise you to offer up a prayer for rain. It's this weather that does it."

"It's not rain I need. It's a playmate."

"But you've got one. And a very charming one, too—even if he is a trifle over-sensitive in the face of the thousand natural shocks the flesh is heir to."

"I don't call being shot up the bottom with a twelve-bore at point-blank range a natural shock," replied Nan huffily. "I've no doubt Julian would shoulder his responsibilities as well as the next man, given a reasonable chance. But what's the use? I can't get at him."

"Patience, patience! These things always arrange themselves. Never forget: love will find a way."

"Arrange themselves, indeed! I thought that's what *you* were supposed to be doing. Not that I see much sign of it."

"Give me time. I'm doing my best."

Nan looked sourly at him spread-eagled beside her, his pipe-bowl balanced on his chest, the brim of the deplorable deerstalker tipped forward over his eyes.

"Well, all I can say is, if this is your best it doesn't impress me."

"I'm sorry to hear that. A good deal less than my best has impressed plenty of others—as my files full of glowing testimonials bear witness. And you have only to mention my name in the Sanctum Club to see them

all down on their knees in the aisles, mouthing their orisons."

At this, Nan had the grace to colour slightly and avert her eyes. "Sorry. I'm being rude and ungrateful, I'm afraid. But you've no idea how a girl feels. . . ."

"On the contrary. After twenty years' experience as a Negotiator, I sometimes think it's the only idea I have got."

"Then why the devil," she demanded viciously, "aren't you doing something about it now? One might suppose that I was a cross between a giant sting-ray and a hairy ainu."

He slowly levered himself up and lit his pipe. "Because"—puff—"of the relationship"—puff, puff—"that already exists between us."

"Relationship! Either you have a very vivid imagination, or I've lost the use of my senses."

"I mean the professional relationship between Negotiator and client. It is governed by an extremely rigid code of etiquette to which there are no exceptions. None whatever."

Nan looked at him in amazement. "Are you trying to tell me that you never cut a caper with your lady customers?"

"Never."

She contemplated him in silence for several moments; then shook her head and smiled cynically.

"It makes a good story. But I happen to know some of your clients: Magdalen Cone, Rose Cleft, Primrose Willing, to name but three. You can't ask me to believe that your professional etiquette stands up to that stamp of girl."

"I'm not asking you to believe it. It's self-evident."

"Indeed? How so?"

"Because I'm still in business—and able to get around without crutches."

Nan twiddled her toes and nodded slowly. "H'm. I see what you mean."

She sighed profoundly. "Ah, well, it looks as if I shall have to be patient, after all."

"Cheer up. It won't be long now, I promise you. There may not be much sign of progress at the moment, but Random moves in a mysterious way his wonders to perform. Having waited so long, surely you can wait a bit longer."

"I suppose so. But what worries me is whether Julian can. He has such an affectionate nature. And, with his artistic temperament, he's so absent-minded. Something might easily happen to him without his really noticing it."

"Oh, come! He may be absent-minded, but he's not a bloody fairy—not, at least, if one can judge by his capacity for neat double whiskies."

"And he's so innocent, the little pet," insisted Nan. "As witness what happened when that awful Topsy Turvey invited him to go primrosing with her in Tickle-Fancy Spinney."

"Well, what did happen?"

"He came back with a damn great bunch of primroses."

She leaned towards him, her cherry-red lips pouting deliciously, her lustrous eyes wide with child-like anxiety. "So you see why I'm so worried."

"I do indeed. But I doubt if there's any real mental deficiency there. Just what the educationists call a slow developer. With a little application he'll soon get a grasp of the rudiments."

"No doubt. But will they be mine?"

"If they're not," replied Guy, flicking his match

decisively into the water, "he's not only a slow developer, he's stark staring crazy."

At this, she fanned her tremendous eyelashes and nestled closer. "Oh, Guy! And I thought you hadn't noticed."

"Indeed? Then why do you suppose I took this job on in the first place?"

She pushed back her curls and looked at him in bewilderment. "But I thought you said that professional etiquette forbade . . ."

He leaned across and kissed her on the nose-end. "Precisely, my pet. That's why I hastened to offer my services and get our relationship on a professional basis."

She recoiled, colouring hotly under her tan. "To protect yourself from my advances, you mean? Thereby putting me in the same class as Mesdames Cone, Cleft and Willing."

"Contrariwise. To protect you from mine. Thereby putting you in a class by yourself."

"Oh, Guy! You *are* a darling."

"I know. It just comes naturally."

He jumped to his feet and ruffled her curls. "Come, my sweet! It's high time we repackaged those rudiments and got pedalling."

12

THE day which had begun so badly for Sir Walter Ramage went steadily from worse to worst.

When, after his brush with Guy on the tricycle, he finally arrived at his County Council meeting, he

found that the news of the rumpus at Dodder had spread through the district with all the customary speed of rural scandal and with even more than the customary exaggeration. His colleagues were already primed with various fancifully embroidered versions of the affair, and he was subjected to much obnoxious leg-pulling, especially by a clique of bolshic back-benchers who bitterly resented his domineering habits in the Chair and were only too delighted to have the chance of taking a poke at him.

The afternoon proved no less vexatious. His telephone was jammed with calls from business associates and social acquaintances, all overflowing with jocular references to flying chamber-pots, fat ladies in combinations, and allied subjects. The breaking-point came at three o'clock when the Lord Lieutenant of the County, an amiable but addle-pated nobleman, rang up to remonstrate with his Deputy for chasing six young ladies in their nighties into the village duck-pond—a manoeuvre scarcely in keeping, he ventured to suggest, with the dignity of high public office. After that, Sir Walter went to ground, furiously instructing his secretary to block all incoming calls for the rest of the day.

These petty annoyances were bad enough, but there was far worse to come—the important dinner-party which he had arranged for a visiting group of Canadian industrialists.

Deprived of his cook, Mrs. Clatter, he was obliged to entertain his guests at the Elderbury Arms, where the food and service were notoriously abominable. In an attempt to cover these deficiencies he plied his visitors so lavishly with liquor that they soon lost all interest in the technicalities of the plastics industry. On the other hand, they showed an altogether excessive

interest in the morning's mayhem at Dodder-in-the-Bottom, of which they had seen a lurid account in the local evening newspapers. The fiasco was complete when they decided unanimously to postpone their next day's inspection of Sir Walter's factory in favour of a conducted tour of Tickle-Fancy Spinney.

As he drove home at ten o'clock he was hovering on flash-point, and only one more provocation was needed to trigger-off a first-class explosion. This was duly provided, when he reached the entrance to his drive, in the shape of a flaunting scarlet and yellow poster affixed to the stone gatepost.

Half an hour later he concluded his interrogation of Mrs. Spindle, his housekeeper, who was standing by his desk in her usual attitude of meek submission. For some moments he remained silent, glowering at the poster spread out in front of him. Then he sprang to his feet, kicked back his chair and, most unusually, poured himself a hard whisky.

Jabbing a finger at the offending document, he spoke with harsh clipped deliberation. "It's down-right calculated insolence, that's what it is. And if Tucket thinks he can flout my authority in this fashion he's very much mistaken. Trying to get tough with me, is he ! All right. I'll damn soon show him that two can play at that game. I've cancelled his lecture for him once, and I'll see that it stays cancelled."

He tossed back his drink and slapped his glass down on the desk. "Ellen ! "

"Yes, sir ? "

"You'll go straight down to the village and get hold of Sam Clamp and Tom Trunnon. Tell 'em I want 'em up here immediately, and no questions asked."

"Very well, sir. But I doubt if they'll be willin' to turn out at this time of night."

"They'll turn out all right. They know which side their bread's buttered on. Get along with you, now, and look sharp about it."

Mrs. Spindle cast a quick, furtive glance at Sir Walter's face as she left the room and softly closed the door behind her. At the top of the stairs she paused, then tiptoed down a short passage and tapped at the door of Julian's private den adjoining his bedroom.

He looked up from a desk littered with books and papers. "Hello there, Ellen. What is it?"

"There's something I feel I ought to tell you, sir. Something serious like."

"Indeed? I can hardly wait."

"It's about this magic-lantern lecture of Mr. Tucket's at the Rectory tomorrow night. Sir Walter's in a rare state about it."

"I've no doubt he is, especially as he's tried to squash it once already."

"That's just it, sir. And I'm afraid he's going to try and squash it again."

"What! How?"

"I don't know. But he's just told me to get Sam Clamp and Tom Trummon up here, sharpish. I don't like the sound of it, Mr. Julian, sir."

Julian sat up smartly. "And neither do I, Ellen. Not at all. Thanks for telling me."

Mrs. Spindle permitted herself a slight smile. "That's all right, sir. I know how it is with you and Miss Nan, and what you have to put up with from Sir Walter, which is a proper shame to my way of thinking, though it's not in my place to say so." She tiptoed back to the doorway and peered cautiously into the corridor. "So I thought I'd better let you know, in case something nasty might happen down at the Rectory."

"I'm very grateful, Ellen. It looks as if there's trouble brewing. I'll keep my eyes and ears open."

At eleven-thirty Laura Stain was lying on the drawing-room sofa in a smoke-grey chiffon peignoir and a sullen fever of temperament. Discarded magazines littered the carpet. A half-finished drink and an ash-tray full of cigarette stubs dyed with lipstick stood on the table at her elbow.

The french windows were wide open, for the night was oppressive : still, sultry, the accumulated heat of the day trapped under a low cloud cover. The scent of nocturnal flowers drifted into the room, mingling with the hot harsh exhalation of *Madrigal Triste*.

As the clock on the chimney-piece softly chimed the half-hour, Laura lit yet another cigarette, expelled a shallow yawn and jerked her limbs restlessly on the cushions. Her eyelids drooped. Her distended lips were set in a sulky *moue*. Through the haze of smoke she looked down at the photograph of Guy Random in the magazine lying in her lap—Guy deploying the famous flashing grin and drenching the wife of a South American ambassador with the shameless Random charm.

"Cad!" she whispered. "Self-satisfied brute!" And with a sudden furious gesture she pitched the magazine across the room.

She stood up and ground out her cigarette. This was intolerable. There was only one thing to do : go to bed and knock herself out with a double dose of sleeping-pills.

"Er . . . excuse me. . . ."

She turned towards the french windows, and the sulky *moue* melted into the brilliant, pulse-stopping

smile. "Why, what a pleasant surprise ! Mr. Ramage, I believe ? "

Julian blushed and executed a *pas seul* of embarrassment on the threshold. "I'm so terribly sorry to intrude upon you like this, but . . ."

"Not at all. Do come in and sit down. Try the arm-chair there."

He advanced and perched himself on the extreme edge, averting his eyes and blushing still more acutely as the light of the standard lamp demonstrated the limitations of the chiffon peignoir.

"Cigarette ? And what can I offer you to drink ? A drop of gin perhaps ? "

Flying the bottles and glasses, she eyed him appreciatively. What a pet he was, to be sure, with his tumbling lock of black hair, melting brown eyes and cupid's-bow lips. How admirably the white silk shirt and narrow dark trousers showed off his slim lithe figure. And the general air of romantic distraction was quite irresistible. She picked up the gin bottle again and added another solid shot.

"There you are, Mr. Ramage. And good luck ! "

He looked up as she leaned towards him, and thereupon swallowed half his drink at a single gulp.

When at last his paroxysm of coughing had abated, she shook her head and smiled ruefully. "Sorry about that. I'm afraid I mixed you a pretty fierce one ; but I thought you looked as if you needed it. Forgive me saying so, but you do appear to be in a bit of a state."

Julian riveted his eyes on the carpet between his feet and took a grip on himself. "Well, as a matter of fact, I've come to see you about something very urgent. It's this magic-lantern lecture of Mr. Tucket's tomorrow night."

"Yes? What's the trouble?"

"It's my father, Sir Walter Ramage. He's determined to stop it. As you probably know, he persuaded the village Hall committee to veto it there; and now that Mr. Tucket has transferred it to the Rectory, he's more determined than ever to stop it."

"Go on."

"He's hired a couple of toughs from the village to burn the marquee down."

"What!"

"It's a fact. Mrs. Spindle, our housekeeper, told me about it, and I managed to listen outside the study window whilst he was fixing it with them. They're going to do the job some time after midnight, and he's paying them five pounds apiece. The thing'll go up like tinder in this hot weather—and all Mr. Tucket's gear with it, unless we do something."

He thrust his hand into his hip-pocket and produced a typewritten envelope. "This is to warn Nan. I must get it to her without delay."

"Of course. But I don't quite understand where I come . . ."

"I—I wondered if you would be kind enough to take it up to the Rectory for me. They're not on the telephone, and I daren't go myself."

"You *daren't*? But why?"

"Because the last time I went, Mr. Tucket shot me."

"My dear boy!"

"At point-blank range with a double-barrelled twelve-bore. Fortunately he missed."

"I'm greatly relieved to hear it. And in view of all the facts, I think it shows a very forgiving spirit on your part to warn him about the marquee."

"Well, you see, I'm . . . I'm extremely fond of Nan."

"Ah, I understand."

"And as you're going to preside at the lecture, I thought you might help. There's no one else in the village I can trust."

She pushed the bell-button by the fireplace. "Your letter shall be delivered at once, Mr. Ramage. For me it is always a pleasure—nay, a duty—to assist the course of true love. Apart from which, I have never before presided over a magic-lantern lecture, and I've no intention of being deprived of that experience."

There was a knock on the door and her maid came in—a highly inflated *brune* with curly black hair and a perkily self-assured manner.

"I'm sorry to trouble you at this time of night, Rose, but I wonder if you'd mind running up to the Rectory straight away with this letter. It's very urgent, and I want you to deliver it to Miss Tucket personally. You understand?"

"Yes, m'm."

"And, Rose!"

"Yes, m'm?"

"I shan't need anything else tonight. When you get back you can go straight to bed."

The young woman gave Julian a single comprehensive glance and stepped back to the door. "Yes, m'm. I *quite* understand."

Julian heaved a deep sigh. "I can't tell you how grateful I am. I wish there was something more I could do; but at least I've warned them in good time." He rose and tossed back his dangling lock. "And now I think I'd better be going."

"Oh, no, Julian—I may call you that, I hope? Don't rush away. At least stay and have another drink. The night is young, and I've been feeling rather lonely."

"Well, I . . ."

She leaned across, closed her long rapacious fingers on his wrist and impelled him back to his chair. "Come, now! You'll make me think you find my company tedious."

"Oh, no! I assure you I . . ."

The touch of her fingers set his pulses racing. He was completely disorganised by the opaque stare of her green eyes, the fierce scent of her skin, the manifold intimacies so insistently obvious through the grey mist of chiffon.

"Or can it be that you're shy, Julian? Surely not."

He ducked his head awkwardly. "Well, I'm afraid I always do feel a bit out of my depth in female company. I've never had much to do with girls—with women."

She suppressed a smile at the unconsciously tactless amendment. How old, she wondered, did he really think she was?

"You surprise me. You're not a soured old misogynist already, I hope?"

"Of course not. But somehow I've never been much interested—until I met Nan, that is."

"And then it was love at first sight?"

"Yes, for both of us. Not that there seems to be much hope, with my father and Mr. Tucket at loggerheads and refusing to let us see one another. I suppose things will straighten themselves out in the end somehow. I shall just have to go on waiting."

"It must be very hard."

"It is. It's awful. In fact I sometimes feel as if——"

He broke off abruptly, and she smoothly covered his embarrassment by taking his glass from his hand.

"The same again? And do smoke up. I always like my guests to encourage me in my vices."

Presently, from her nest of cushions, she saw that the second pink gin was doing its work. He was beginning to lose his self-consciousness. With the third he would start to gain self-confidence. The tip of her tongue crept across her lips. Really, it was more than one had any right to expect. Handsome, charming, sensitive—and quite untouched. She lay back, linked her hands under her head and drew up her right leg so that the wrapper fell away from her knee.

"I'm sorry to hear that things are so difficult for you," she murmured. "*Two unco-operative fathers* is pretty tough pedalling. It's really too bad of them."

"Well, in all fairness, I must say that I don't altogether blame Mr. Tucket. There's no getting away from the fact that my father has treated him abominably. So I suppose it's only natural that he should refuse to let Nan have anything to do with me. And after this business tonight I don't know what'll happen."

"Your father certainly seems to be a pretty hard character."

"A hard character! He's—he's a perfect brute. In fact, I can hardly believe sometimes that he *is* my father. Oh, I know that one shouldn't say these things about one's parents, but he really is impossible. I'm not surprised that my mother ran away from him—no doubt you've heard about that. I wonder she stuck it as long as she did. I can never understand why she married him in the first place. She must have had plenty of others to choose from. She was Lucy Vervain, the famous beauty, you know."

"Lucy Vervain!"

"Yes. Why?"

"Oh, nothing. It just struck me as an unusual name."

He put down his empty glass and clasped his hands between his knees. "I should have cleared out myself, long before this, if it weren't for Nan. I've tried to persuade her to go away with me, but she says it would upset Mr. Tucket so much that she can't bring herself to do it. And if we did take-off, I should lose my job and we shouldn't have anything to live on. I don't know why I'm telling you all this. I must be boring you. I apologise."

"Not at all. I think it's very charming of you to take me into your confidence. And I know how it helps if one can unburden one's woes occasionally."

"It does indeed. And it's very kind of you to listen so patiently, especially as we hardly know one another."

"Knowing a person isn't a matter of time, Julian. For me, at any rate, it's a matter of instinct. As soon as you came in this evening I sensed that you were—how shall I put it?—*sympathique*."

"You did? How extraordinary. Because—well—I felt just the same way about you."

She gave him a sidelong glance under her lowered lashes. He was rapidly becoming stabilised. One might, perhaps, try something a little more enterprising. She nodded towards the chimney-piece.

"Do you mind giving me a cigarette? I'm too lazy to get up."

When he offered her the box she tilted her chin, with her hands still linked under her head, and shaped her mouth into a receptive circle. He hesitated for a moment, then took the hint and placed the cigarette between her lips. The match flickered erratically, and raising her right hand she deliberately cupped it round his own. The movement of her arm dislodged the veil of chiffon from her bosom. She heard the

breath catch in his throat, and he stepped back sharply.

Too soon ! With instant *expertise* she retrieved the situation by a deft diversion. "Thank you. And I notice, by the way, that you have a pianist's fingers. Am I right ? "

"I play a bit when I get the time."

"Then play a bit now, won't you ? That Bechstein's a real beauty. As you see, I've been fumbling around with the '*Années de Pèlerinage*.' Perhaps you can show me how the stuff really ought to go."

She watched him closely as he crossed to the piano and sat down. There was no sign of boyish blushes now. Instead, he was markedly pale, and more deliciously romantic looking than ever. She settled back on the cushions. It was going to be an exceedingly delicate and interesting operation, calling for an ungrudging expenditure of time and patience. But the surrender, when at last it came, would almost certainly be well worth waiting for.

"Speaking as a Negotiator, I strongly deplore the use of force ; and physical violence I find particularly repugnant. But there are times, alas, when one has no choice ; and this is one of them."

Guy carefully dropped Julian's warning letter into the hall stove and faced the Tucket household who were clustered round the table in the dim light of a single oil-lamp.

"I, for my part, entertain no such misgivings," replied the Rector, drawing himself up to his full six-foot-one and crossing his arms on his formidable chest. "I assure you, Random, that this is just the opportunity I've been yearning for these last twelve months and more—the chance to let off a little pent-up

steam and teach some of these bas . . . these hooligans a very sharp lesson."

"Quite so, sir. But this looks like being a rumbustious party, and I must warn you that I, personally, can take no active part in it. Normally I am not averse from a discreet rough-and-tumble when it is forced upon me, but just now it doesn't suit my plans. I must remain in the background for a little while longer."

"Don't mention it, my boy. Cecil and I will manage this between us."

"You're quite sure? I gather that Messrs. Clamp and Trunnion are a couple of saucy handfuls, and we can't afford any mistakes. What about whistling up a few reserves? I've a notion that Toby Gantree might relish a little exercise."

"Quite unnecessary," retorted Mr. Tucket, slipping off his jacket. "Cecil and I will manage very nicely. Won't we, my lad?"

He turned to Cecil who had just reappeared from the back regions with a jagged pick-axe helve dangling from his hand. He was already stripped for action, his costume consisting of steel-tipped hob-nail boots, corduroy trousers supported by a tremendous leather belt decorated with harness-brasses, and a sweat-stained cotton singlet.

Peering sombrely under his matted fringe, he hefted the club in his fist as if it were a toothpick. "That's roight, Mester Tucket, sir! You an' me'll wahm boogers arses fer 'un!"

"You see how Cecil feels about it, Random. And as for myself, I might remind you that I was an Oxford front-row forward in my day, and what went on in those loose mauls was nobody's business—least of all the referee's. Now, what have you in mind?"

"The essence of a good battle-plan," replied Guy,

"is simplicity combined with surprise. I suggest, therefore, that you conceal yourself in the entrance to the marquee and let the enemy come right in to close quarters, until you can see the whites of their eyes. Then you will launch yourself upon them in a direct frontal assault. Simultaneously, Cecil will unleash a classic left-hook flank attack from the area of the copper beech. My plan, you will notice, is a replica of that with which the Great Man forced the Mareth Line ; and I anticipate that it will be attended by the same success. Any questions ? "

"There's one point," said the Rector. " You instruct me to wait until I can see the whites of their eyes."

"Ycs. Well ? "

"Two objections occur to me. First, it is an uncommonly dark night, and I question whether it will be possible to see the whites of anybody's eyes—short of persuading him to stand like a graven image whilst one scrutinises his features with a powerful electric torch. Second, I very much doubt if either Sam Clamp or Tom Trunnon *has* any whites to his eyes, in view of their nightly intake of beer up at the Dropped Clanger."

"Come, sir ! " replied Guy tartly. " This is no time for quibbling. I was speaking metaphorically. If you think you won't be able to detect the whites of their eyes, then just wait until you can smell the manure on their boots. Judging by my own experience in daylight, I'm satisfied that even the local aborigines won't be able to move six paces after dark without getting dunged to the kneecaps."

He looked at his watch. " It's nearly midnight. Time we doused all lights and took up battle positions. We may have to wait—possibly as much as two hours.

On the other hand, the boys probably won't waste much time, as they have to get up in the morning to go to work."

"As I understand it," said Nan, "the only work that anybody gets up for in Dodder these days is gandering. And you don't have to clock-in for that until two p.m."

Guy blew out the hall lamp and assembled his troops in the porch. He pointed across the drive to the vague white bulk of the marquee looming through the darkness in the middle of the lawn.

"Right, Mr. Tucket, off you go ! Conceal yourself just inside the entrance. And when the time comes to launch your assault, don't forget the guy-ropes. A couple of broken legs would tend to place you at something of a disadvantage. Also, I must ask you to refrain from smoking. The enemy, I fear, would smell your pipe long before you smelted their manure.

"You, Cecil, will get in there under the copper beech. And I suggest that you take the precaution of pinning back your front hair ; otherwise, when you unleash your flank attack, you may tend to stray off your axis of advance, and so arrive late for the battle.

"Nan, Mrs. Musk ! I want you to act as sentries and, if possible, give us some warning of the enemy's approach. You, Mrs. Musk, will nestle behind the big chestnut tree half-way down the lane on the right-hand side. You, Nan, will lurk in the angle of the boundary fence, behind the hollyhocks, to cover the approaches from the paddock. As soon as either of you sees or hears anything suspicious you must hoot thrice like an owl, thus : Tu-whit, tu-whooo ! Any questions ? "

"Yes," said Nan. "Whilst we're grovelling in the undergrowth, being perforated by mosquitoes in

prohibited areas and hooting ourselves silly, what will you be doing, pray?"

"I shall be here, in the porch, at forward tactical headquarters, keeping my sensitive finger on the fluctuating pulse of the battle."

"I see. And if you've still got a sensitive finger to spare when the battle's over, I shall require the loan of it. For scratching."

With this, she sidled out of the porch and vanished into the night, followed by the rest of the party. The strokes of midnight clanged ominously from the church tower. A deep, tense silence enclosed the Rectory garden.

The last notes expired in the still, scented shadows of the drawing-room.

"Lovely, Julian, lovely. After that you deserve another drink. And mix one for me, too."

When he gave her the glass and stepped back towards his chair, she laid a hand on his arm and drew her legs aside on the sofa.

"Sit here, beside me. I can't see you properly over there. Which would be a pity, as you're rather nice to see."

He sank down slowly on the cushions, like one hypnotised. His aspect was now so distraught, his pallor so accentuated, that she looked at him with a touch of alarm.

"My dear boy, whatever is the matter? Are you feeling un . . . oh, I see! This is a rather useless bit of nonsense, I'm afraid. And I always seem to lose the girdle."

He gulped at his drink and remained mute. She could feel, along the cushions, the quivering of his tensed muscles. How sweet he was; quite beside

himself, and trembling like a startled gazelle. And a gazelle now fixed beyond the possibility of flight. He was helpless. . . . But first the gazelle must be transformed into the ravening cheetah; the roles reversed so that the taker became the taken—and thereby, perversely, so much the more the taker.

"How silent you are, Julian. Surely you're not always so reserved as this? Not with your Nan, at any rate, I hope."

"I'm sorry. But, you see, I've—I've never met anyone like you before. You're so different from the—the female company I come across round here."

"You mean the *girls* you come across round here—the difference being fifteen to twenty years. In case you're wondering, Julian, I'm thirty-eight. And most of the time I feel it."

"Oh, please! You misunderstand me. When I say you're different I mean you're so—so polished and stylish and self-assured. I'm afraid I must seem very dull and uninteresting to you."

"Handsome young men in their early twenties are rarely uninteresting to lonely widows in their late thirties."

For the first time he ventured to look directly into her eyes. "Lonely? I find that difficult to believe."

"Why?"

"There must be lots of men—clever and amusing men of your own kind—who would give anything to . . . to take you around."

"Oh, there are always lots of men—and lots of going around. But that doesn't help very much, I'm afraid. To be starved in the midst of plenty is the worst state of all."

"Starved? You mean . . ."

She lay back on the cushions and closed her eyes.

"Of love, Julian. That's what I mean. Of love. All the playmates, all the going around, never a dull moment—and never the only thing that matters : just a little love."

From under her lowered lashes she watched the shoddy sentiment do its threadbare trick. His big dark eyes were charged with anxious sympathy.

"I'm so very sorry. I'd no idea. I never guessed."

"Why should you? It can't be helped. One must just go on waiting, I suppose. And hoping."

In the taut silence she momentarily rebelled. Really, it was too much. These shabby old tricks, these queasy clichés of cinema-amour. Was there any depth to which one would not descend to gratify the hungry flesh? And then, quite automatically, the tears which she had always been able to produce at will, oozed out onto her checks in two big shining drops.

In a single swift movement he was on his knees beside her, his fingers closing tremulously on her right hand drooping over the edge of the sofa. His voice was a moth-wing caress.

"Laura . . . my dear. Don't cry, please don't cry."

Tu-whit, tu-whooo . . . tu-whit, tu-whooo . . . tu-whit, tu-whooo. . . .

Guy edged towards the porch entrance, his ears cocked, his eyes straining to pierce the darkness of the garden now diluted by the milky radiance of the rising moon. The warning signal had come from the direction of the boundary fence, from Nan.

A moment later she materialised ghost-fashion from the deep shadows under the lee of the house and joined him in the porch.

"Pssst! They're coming in across the paddock,"

she whispered. "I heard a metallic thump, like somebody falling over a petrol-can, and then some ever such nasty words."

Guy crouched down to get a horizon, and caught a fleeting glimpse of two silhouettes straddling the fence on the far side of the wide lawn. Then they melted into the cover of the thicket of hollyhocks in the herbaceous border.

"False alarm?" breathed Nan.

"No. It's them all right. Making a reconnaissance."

Silence. Utter stillness.

Suddenly Nan's nails dug into his palm. "There, Guy! By the laurel hedge!"

He traversed half-right and saw them fairly: two crouching shapes edging round the perimeter of the lawn towards the entrance of the marquee. He stopped breathing. . . . Now they were moving out onto the open turf, closing on their objective. There was a faint clang of metal, the gurgle of pouring liquid. What the hell was Mr. Tucket doing? Any moment now the thing would go up in flames. The old boy must have gone to sleep! There was only one thing for it: he would have to go in himself.

Then, just as he braced himself to rocket across the drive, a compact black mass soared out of the side of the marquee and crashed headlong into the two incendiaries bending over their petrol-cans.

"Oof! Ouch! Wheew!"

The exclamations jerked unconsciously from Guy's lips as his own flesh winced in sympathy with the excruciating cracks and thuds erupting from the whirl of limbs amongst the twanging support-ropes and splintering tent-pegs. . . . But where was Cecil? The flank-attack had failed and the Rector was outnumbered two to one! Again he braced himself to

hurtle into the conflict—and again he was forestalled : this time by a sudden pounding of feet on the weedy gravel of the drive. Then Cecil flashed past the porch, heading strongly for the gateway and the open country.

"It's that bloody fringe!" yelped Guy. "He can't see where he's going!"

Nan's voice cut through the night. "Steady there, Cecil ! You're going the wrong way. Left hand down ! "

At this, Cecil skidded to a halt in a shower of pebbles, executed a guardsman's left-turn and took off like a thunderbolt in the direction of the marquee, his right hand whirling his pick helve, his left hand shoring-up the down-jutting peak of his wiry pelt.

Three seconds later there was a sickening crack akin to the fragmentation of a coconut shell. Then another.

In due course Guy relit the hall lamp and looked with admiration at the battle-scarred figure of the Rector who was alternately dabbing at a deep gash over his left eye with a dirty pocket-handkerchief and meditatively sucking the raw knuckles of his right hand.

"Well, sir, that seems to be that!"

Mr. Tucket grinned happily. "Quite so, Random. I don't know when I enjoyed myself so much. Upon my soul, I feel thirty years younger. Clearly, what I need is more regular exercise."

"I'm afraid Cecil was a bit late joining in. He got temporarily disorientated by his forelock."

"Neither here nor there, dear boy. It made no odds. However, he came in quite usefully to dot the i's and cross the t's, as the saying goes. He's just parcelling the brutes up with tarred rope."

"They're still warm and mobile, I trust?" enquired Guy with a touch of anxiety.

"Warm, dear lad, but far from mobile. No cause for alarm. Just a touch of straightforward concussion. These fellows have skulls like tank turrets."

"I'm greatly relieved to hear it. And what do you propose to do with them now?"

"Well, one bears no grudge, of course; and now that they have been taught their lesson I feel we should make them as comfortable as possible. Since it is a very warm night, I suggest that we load them onto the old hand-cart in the coach-house and trundle them down to the duck-pond to cool off—a destination which they and their cronies have so monotonously recommended for myself. Poetic irony, Random!"

"A capital idea," replied Guy, making for the door. "I must leave it to you and Cecil, however. I have other urgent business to attend to. See you later."

He vanished briskly into the night.

"You're so beautiful; so fragile and delicate. Like some exquisite work of art. I feel that when I touch you I'm committing a sacrilege."

"You're imagining things," she murmured. "You're making a fantasy of me. I'm just a woman, Julian. A woman."

Her voice was edged with a shadow of impatience. His delicacy, his sensitivity were very charming, no doubt, and very flattering. But, beyond a certain point, delicacy and sensitivity could become tedious, even exasperating. And the point had been passed some time ago.

"Yes, but so different. So utterly unlike any woman I've ever known before. I can't really believe that I'm here beside you, actually touching you . . . holding your hand."

And that was all he looked like holding, at this rate, she thought. Her exasperation intensified. She suspected that he was rather enjoying his state of awed wonderment, rather 'seeing' himself in the role of the ethereal Shelleyan lover. His breathless avowals were beginning to sound a trifle mechanical—and boringly repetitive. Unless she applied the spur, this airy-fairy skirmishing could go on indefinitely.

She turned towards him on the cushions. "Sweet Julian," she whispered. "Gentle Julian. Let me look at you."

Raising her disengaged hand, she drew his head down towards her waiting mouth. He stiffened and drew back, alarmed, uncertain. But she drew his head downwards still more insistently. She saw his eyes close and the muscles of his throat contract convulsively.

The frisson leapt in her—leapt and as quickly subsided under his gentle, child-like kiss. His hands hovered at her shoulders, then shied away to the support of the cushions. The Peter Pan caresses fluttered to her cheeks and cyclids. Her ravenous lips closed in a thin hard line. Farce! Pathetic, ludicrous farce! And she, not he, was the busoon.

She suddenly turned her face from him and pushed him back so violently that he almost overbalanced.

"For God's sake leave me alone!"

"Laura!"

"That's what I said. Leave me alone! And you'd better go. Now, at once. Can't you understand?"

"But—but why?"

She raised herself on one elbow and stared contemptuously into his shocked, bewildered eyes. "Why? Because you bore me, that's why!"

His stunned silence provoked her still further and

she leaned towards him, her eyes narrowed. "Because—*you—bore—me*. Is that clear enough?"

He recoiled and rose to his feet. "But, I thought..."

"*What did you think?*"

"That—that you wanted me to make love to you."

She gave a soft, derisive laugh, tilting her chin, offering the beautiful line of her throat. "Make love! My dear boy, you don't know what you're talking about."

"But you let me kiss you."

"Oh, so that's what it was supposed to be? As I've pointed out once before this evening, you have a very vivid imagination."

There was a long silence. Then he spoke quite softly and evenly. "I'm sorry if I disappointed you."

She gave him a quick, sidelong glance. He was looking down at her intently, and his pallor was now suffused by a flush of—anger? She flicked him again, deliberately.

"Please don't apologise. The fault was entirely mine. But all the same, I think you'd better go. It's rather too long to wait."

"To wait? For what?"

"Until you grow up."

He took a quick step towards her and his voice shook. "If you're trying to insult me you're succeeding—admirably."

"Not at all, my dear boy. I'm merely trying to conclude a somewhat ludicrous episode as tactfully as possible. I advise you to forget all about it, and dedicate yourself henceforth to—well . . ."

"Go on. To what?"

"Oh, I don't know. Something more suited to your sensitive temperament—such as picking primroses in Tickle-Fancy Spinney."

"Shut up! Hold your tongue! Do you hear me?"

"Why, Julian! You're quite forgetting your manners. Is that the way to speak to a lady?"

"A lady?"

He stood looking down at her, now suddenly relaxed and completely master of himself, his lips set in a detached contemptuous smile. "A lady? Why, you're nothing but a rather fancy tart."

He caught her wrist as she lashed at his face, and went for her like a snake striking. Her head jerked back under the impact of his mouth, his teeth lacerating her peeled-back lips.

"Julian . . . aaah . . ."

"*Oh, pardon me! I trust I don't hintrewd.*"

Guy turned back from the french windows. "Ah, well, two's company, three's none, I suppose. Pity he wouldn't stay for a night-cap. One should never retire to bed with disordered nerves. Lackaday! The impetuosity of youth!"

Coiled up in a corner of the sofa, Laura watched him help himself to a paralysing whisky and sink at ease into the armchair opposite to her.

"I think," she said softly, "that you are quite the most insufferable man I have ever come across. Of all the moments to choose for *dropping in for a cosy natter!* In fact, I could easily believe that you did it deliberately."

"Of course."

"I see." She slowly lit a cigarette and blew a cloud of smoke at the ceiling. "May I ask why?"

"Professional obligations. It is my duty to safeguard the interests of my clients. And that, in this case, includes the matrimonial interests of Miss Tucket."

"And so?"

"When I learned that Julian had called here in person with his warning letter, I could not help recalling your remarks the other night about the age of the cleft stick. And it occurred to me that one thing, as they say, might lead to another."

"Your professional conscientiousness is indeed a credit to you."

"I wouldn't have you think that I was activated solely by professional considerations. Moral principle also played its part. Always something of a Mrs. Grundy, I have certain prudish scruples about—how shall I put it?—*le détournement des mineurs*. I'm not unreasonable about it, I hope. I just feel that one should wait until they've got the cradle-marks off their bottoms."

He smiled at her confidentially. "I trust you don't find my frankness objectionable?"

"Not at all. But I think it hardly wise."

"Yes?"

"It could lead to an attack of moral scruples on my part—scruples about patronising a phoney magic-lantern lecture, for example. Not to mention . . ."

"You are threatening to deprive me of your assistance in arranging matters?"

"Well, I hope I'm not petty-minded, but . . ."

"On the contrary, you're an uncommonly intelligent woman, and so will realise the folly of cutting off your nose to spite your face; likewise the folly of sacrificing the substance for the shadow."

"Must you converse exclusively in homespun proverbs?"

"Very well, I'll interpret. You only went after Julian just now *faute de mieux*. The one you really want is me. And you've got enough sense to know

that if you deprive me of your assistance you never will get me. On the other hand, if you exercise a little patience, until I've finished my present assignment . . .”

She carefully tapped the ash off her cigarette. “Your conceit is so monstrous that it's almost awe-inspiring—like some fantastic disease. Do you *really* think that every woman you meet automatically goes crazy about you ? ”

“Not at all, thank God. The only women who automatically go crazy about me are the beautiful, elegant and intelligent ones, like yourself.”

She looked at him incredulously for a moment, and then began to laugh, frankly and delightedly.

He crossed his legs and joined his finger-tips. “And now, if you will kindly give me your attention for a few minutes, I have a little scheme to discuss with you.”

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“ONLY five minutes to go,” said Nan, “and they're still pouring in ! Thank God it's a fine night.”

Guy nodded and rubbed his hands. “I look forward to a bumper collection. With any luck at all we ought to raise that hundred pounds. I must say I shall feel a lot happier once we've got the Gumption Charity Fund squared up.”

They were standing in the bay windows of the Rectory drawing-room, watching the public arrive for Mr. Tucket's magic-lantern lecture. It was a scene of the utmost animation.

The lane outside the parsonage was packed with assorted motor vehicles, including several private-hire buses bringing organised parties. Cecil, acting as marshal, was hard pressed to control the flood of traffic, and his raucous voice, tearing off jovial obscenities, rose above the tooting of hooters and the grinding of interlocked bumper-bars.

Inside the grounds strings of fairy-lights were suspended from the branches of the trees surrounding the drive and lawn ; and a battery of evilly hissing petrol pressure-lamps illuminated the giant marquee. This was jammed to capacity with three hundred eager customers wedged shoulder to shoulder on chairs and benches on either side of a narrow central gangway. At the front was a small roped-off space enshrining the magic-lantern and screen.

The walls of the marquee had long since been taken down, in order both to preserve the occupants from suffocation and to enable the latecomers to get a view. These latter, still steadily streaming in, were being marshalled around the perimeter by the six Turvey sisters who were clearly in their element and very little else. Stuffed into their most alluring summer frocks, their matchless eyes and teeth flashing in radiant grins, they tottered amongst the crowd on their customary four-inch heels, their celebrated knick-knacks swinging and bouncing in unbridled agitation. From time to time they vented piercing squeaks of anguish or shrill whinnies of delight as the more hot-blooded patrons shrewdly tweaked their amenities *en passant*.

Meanwhile, Mrs. Musk was organising extra seating accommodation, aided by a team of six muscle-bound urchins. These were Cecil's younger brothers who, like the Misses Turvey, had volunteered their services

for the occasion. One and all were distinguished by the family jungle of adenoids and the unmistakable blinding fringe.

"Well, I expected a good deal," said Guy, "but I never reckoned on a response like this." He looked at his watch. "Ten-thirty precisely. She ought to be here at any moment now. I do hope she does us proud, for the spirit of carnival is abroad in Dodder tonight—" He was interrupted by a warbling scream and the scampering of feet in the shadows outside the windows. "Good God! What was that?"

"The spirit of carnival," said Nan. "Toby Gantree chasing Topsy Turvey up the copper beech."

The glare of headlights flooded the drive, wheels crunched on the weedy gravel and the black Bristol halted at the front door. Mr. Tucket, bowing with courtly grace, stepped forward from the porch.

When she came into the drawing-room Guy drew in his breath with a hiss of satisfaction. Laura had more than done them proud. Always beautiful and elegant, tonight she was superb. Her gown was a strapless white sheath designed with the ferocious simplicity of a Chamfort epigram. From the ribs down she appeared to be enveloped in a second skin of iridescent pearly liquid. Above, the vertiginous swoop of the *décolleté* was more than a revelation; it was a presentation—like the ceremonial unveiling to the public gaze of some fabulous work of art. As usual, her only jewels were the great emeralds of her eyes and ring. The hot, arid exhalation of *Madrigal Triste* was a laceration of the nerves.

"Well, so much for the old cracker-motioes," muttered Nan, reaching for the gin bottle. "You can cram a quart into a pint pot. And two into one will go."

Mr. Tucket was clearly enchanted by his guest, but by no means disconcerted. Under the influence of her tropical temperament his habitual courtesy blossomed into a caressive gallantry touched with a flattering hint of deference. Obviously he was a true man of the world in the best sense of the term : as much at his ease in the glittering salons of the beau-monde as in the reeking cow-paddles of Dodder-in-the-Bottom.

Laura, Guy saw, was no less delighted with the Rector, her glance lingering on his natty lecturing outfit : neatly pressed khaki drill slacks and short-sleeved bush-jacket, with a silk neckerchief in the colours of the Venerable Company of Bombardiers. And, when offered a drink, she gracefully asked Mr. Tucket to mix her a regimental Bombard.

"I do so hope," she apologised, "that I haven't kept everybody waiting ; but getting into this dress is a long-term operation."

Mr. Tucket bowed with a flourish. "That I can readily believe, dear lady. But an operation for which I, at any rate, would willingly wait all night. . . . Another Bombard ? No ? Then I suggest that we go across to the marquee without further delay."

Nan watched Laura quiver and undulate into the hall ; then she rejoined Guy at the bay window.

"How the natives will react to that lot I hesitate to think. I have never before seen any one woman with so much of everything in all the right places."

The reactions of the natives were not long in doubt. As Laura and Mr. Tucket crossed the drive, the din of chatter on the lawn stopped abruptly, and a throbbing hush enveloped the Rectory garden ; a hush that was intensified by the venomous hiss of the glaring pressure-lamps. The brilliantly lighted area

of the marquee presented a solid panorama of stretched necks, pendulous jaws and extruded eyeballs. It was evident that Laura Stain's arrival was much more than the mere personal appearance of a celebrity. It was like Venus rising from the sea—the incarnation of some obsessive tribal legend.

The silence persisted until Mr. Tucket and Laura entered the tent and began to walk slowly up the central gangway in the full light of the lamps. Then, suddenly, from the outer darkness, a prolonged ululating wolf-whistle split the tension.

Thereupon, pandemonium erupted. The whistles built-up into a veritable Wagnerian frenzy, supported by the rhythmical pounding of hob-nailed boots on the sun-baked turf and the clapping of horny hands. Through the hubbub rose guffaws of boorish laughter, shrill female squawks of scandalised amazement, earthy snatches of running commentary.

“ ‘Ow did yer git yerself insoide it, luv ? ”

“ Wi’ a bludy shoe-‘orn I reckon ! ”

“ Watch ‘em, duck ! Moind they don’t pop aht ! ”

“ Yer’ll niver get ‘em back if they once gits loose ! ”

“ Wot abart a noice game o’ crokey ! Oi’ll slip ‘em through the ‘oop fer yer ! ”

“ Got a job fer a gard’ner ? Oi’ll bring me own tools ! ”

“ ‘Ave yer got any on, missus ? Watch them mosketeers ! ”

“ ‘Course she ain’t ! Lost ‘em in Tickle-Fancy Spinney ! ”

Guy followed the demonstration with some anxiety. It was a tricky situation. This uproarious enthusiasm could easily get out of hand. If Laura responded to it in the wrong way, the whole thing might degenerate into an undignified and embarrassing farce.

He waited tensely as she strolled up the gangway towards the roped-off enclosure at the front. Arrived there, she turned about and leisurely surveyed the serried ranks on the benches, the tumultuous mob pressing in around the perimcter. With a sudden swift undulation she stepped up onto her reserved chair beside the magic-lantern. Raising her arms in a triumphant gesture of greeting, she gave them the lot —plus the brilliant, bone-melting smile.

The whistles and cat-calls subsided. The buzz of chatter wavered and ceased. Then, with perfect aplomb, Laura, having won her silence, deliberately held it for a good ten seconds before she started to speak, softly and clearly.

"First of all I have a word for the anxious gentleman at the back." She lowered her hands to her *décolleté* and glanced down. "If they *do* 'pop aht,' I shall expect him to help me put them back again—with or without a 'bludy shoe-orn.' "

There was a moment's stunned pause, followed by a tremendous outburst of applause ; a demonstration which redoubled when Laura pressed her fingers to her lips and blew kisses in all directions.

"Nice work, indeed !" muttered Guy. "She's got 'em in the hollow of her hand."

And he was perfectly correct ; for when at last she again raised her arms for silence the response was immediate, the more persistent enthusiasts being suppressed by angry shush-ings from their neighbours. The mood was now exactly right : hearty good humour tempered with respect for a forceful personality completely sure of itself.

"I am greatly flattered, ladies and gentlemen, by the warmth of this reception. And not only flattered, but also deeply touched. For now I feel that I am

no longer an outsider amongst strangers, but a welcome guest amongst old friends."

At this there was a polite rattle of hand-clapping and a crisp volley of hear-hears ! from Toby Gantree and his glossy mates in the front rows.

" I have no intention of boring you with a long speech. I simply wish to say how honoured and privileged I feel at being invited to preside at this occasion. Although I have resided in these parts for only a few short weeks, I have already heard many glowing accounts of Mr. Tucket's magic-lantern lectures. In them we find scholarship enlivened with sparkling wit. A wealth of interesting information is presented to us through the media of a keen brain and a vivid personality. Tonight, I am sure, another rich feast awaits us in *Rhapsody in Black*. The pictures you will be seeing are literally unique. Many of the most curious customs of the Dark Continent will be revealed, and many fascinating tribal secrets at last laid—cr—bare.

" I feel certain, therefore, that you will wish to join with me in expressing gratitude to Mr. Tucket for the very rare treat which is to be ours. And this, I suggest, we can best do by subscribing liberally to the cause which lies so close to his heart. As the lecture is starting late, and many of you may wish to get away at the end without delay, the usual collection will be taken up now. This is, of course, entirely voluntary, but I am sure we shall all wish to show our appreciation as well as we can. I hesitate to mention figures, but I will tell you quite frankly that my target tonight is one hundred pounds. It is not, I think, an excessive sum in view of the size of this audience and the generous spirit which, as I well know, animates the warm-hearted natives of Elmshire.

The Misses Turvey have kindly consented to take up the collection, and will do so forthwith.

"In conclusion, ladies and gentlemen, permit me to thank you once again for your generous welcome. When the time comes for me to leave Dodder-in-the-Bottom I shall carry away two lasting memories : the sunny disposition of its inhabitants and the sunny warmth of its weather. May I continue to bask in both as long as possible ! "

Watching from the bay window, Nan nodded ungrudgingly. "There's no doubt about it, Guy, she's a proper corker. She'd squeeze the juice out of a diamond. Look at Toby Gantree's gang flashing their note-cases. There's fifty quid in those two front rows alone, unless I'm much mistaken."

"Very gratifying," agreed Guy. "But the Turvey girls are having a rough time I notice. It'll take them all night to get round the customers at this rate. And their sit-upons will be all the colours of the rainbow tomorrow morning."

"Don't worry about the Turvey girls. After a lifetime's conditioning in Tickle-Fancy Spinney they're completely tweak-proof."

In due course Topsy and her sisters completed their task and teetered across the drive with their harvest, contained in six bulging church offertory-bags. The lights in the marquee were extinguished and the resonant voice of Mr. Tucket boomed across the garden as he took post at the magic-lantern and launched into his discourse.

Guy hastened to the front door and ushered the Turveys into the hall where the offertory-bags were emptied onto the table. Then he and Nan settled down to count the revenue. The results exceeded their fondest hopes.

"One hundred and twenty-five pounds!" said Guy quietly. "We're home and dry. We've squared the deficit in the Gumption Charity Fund with twenty-five quid to spare. A very great weight off my mind. This puts your Dad in the clear. Old Wally Ramage hasn't got any hold on us now, and I can really get rifting."

He broke off to snatch a bundle of pound notes out of Nan's fingers. "Thank you, ducky! *I'll* take charge of the money if you don't mind. Otherwise, that rake-hell Julian will start playing poker again up at the Dropped Clanger, and we'll be back where we started."

Nan pouted and flushed. "There's no need to be offensive. What about the extra twenty-five? It's the little pet's birthday next week, and I haven't given him a decent present for ages. Besides, I could do with a few odd knick-knacks myself?"

Guy firmly shook his head. "Nothing doing, honey. We're going to plough the profits back into the industry. That extra twenty-five can be put to good use."

He scribbled a few lines on the note-pad beside him and handed the sheet to her. "Just nip across to the marquee and give that to your Dad at once. It's important. Meanwhile, I'll put this cash in a safe place—safer than the cocoa-tin in the kitchen cupboard."

He was as good as his word, for as soon as Nan had disappeared he went straight up to his room and carefully concealed the night's takings in the chamber-pot of the armchair commode beside his bed.

This done, he returned to the drawing-room and settled down with his pipe and the gin bottle. But not for long. Through the open windows he could hear the enthusiastic reactions of the audience to Mr.

Tucket's singular selection of lantern-slides. Low whistles of incredulity mingled with staccato grunts of passionate admiration. Hoarse male cries of primitive rapacity joined with wistful female sighs of frankest wishful thinking. Spontaneous ejaculations of expert appreciation floated across the lawn.

" Wheew ! Oop them stairs—an' sharpish ! "

" Cor ! That'd show t'owd man wot's wot ! "

" Strewnth, 'e's in an 'urry ! Niver stopped ter tck 'is kit off ! "

" She niver give 'im a chance, mate. No more ter git shut of 'is bow-an'-arrer neether."

" Well, I reckon as 'ow I've seen a few in me time, but niver nowt the likes o' that theer ! "

These manifestations of connoisseurly enthusiasm so provoked Guy's curiosity that he could not resist sampling the last few minutes of the entertainment. But, in accordance with his policy of keeping in the background, he avoided joining the crowd round the marquee. Instead, he sidled round the edge of the drive and climbed up into the branches of the copper beech whence, through a gap in the foliage, he had an excellent view of the screen.

The effort was well worth while, and he speedily understood the great popularity of Mr. Tucket's lectures. This particular selection of slides was indeed unique, eclipsing even the home-ciné film of his banker client's holiday diversions in Málaga.

Mr. Tucket had timed his lecture to end at midnight, but his audience had insisted upon seeing so many of the slides twice or even thrice that it was twelve-thirty before the petrol lamps were turned on to signal the end of the proceedings.

As the Rector stepped aside from his lantern and turned to face his audience the applause almost

equalled that which had greeted Laura Stain. There was no doubt that one and all felt they had had their money's worth and more.

At last the clapping died down and there was a stir of departure amongst the public—a stir which was immediately stilled as Mr. Tucket stepped forward to the head of the gangway and raised his hands.

"One moment, my friends, if you please. Two small points before we break up. Firstly, I must thank you all for coming along here tonight and for the flattering enthusiasm with which you have followed the course of my lecture. Secondly, I have a brief announcement to make which will, I think, be of general interest. I refer to the pay-out of the Gumption Charity Fund. . . ."

He paused as a susurrus of curiosity ran through the company.

"This, as many of you are aware, has been somewhat delayed this year—entirely due, I may say, to circumstances outside my control. However, I am happy to announce that the pay-out will take place tomorrow in the usual way. . . ."

He paused again as a chorus of satisfied 'ahs!' rose from the packed benches.

"Furthermore, it gives me great pleasure to state that this year there will be a substantial increase in the customary benefits. Thanks to a careful and farsighted financial policy, the sum for distribution is no less than one hundred and seventy-five pounds—a clear bonus of twenty-five pounds on the year's income. This, I am sure, will come as a welcome surprise to the many deserving cases in the parish, and will enable them to enjoy the few extra modest comforts to which their advancing years and straitened circumstances so rightly entitle them."

He again raised his hand to quell the first cries of approval, and a hint of sternness appeared in his voice and bearing.

"In conclusion, perhaps you will allow me one slightly personal observation. I am well aware that the delay in this year's pay-out has occasioned some hard feelings in the parish, and that some very bitter insinuations have been made against myself. Well, ladies and gentlemen, I don't propose to dwell on this unpleasantness. It is all over now, and I think I can rightly claim that I have never been one to nurse a grudge. Nevertheless, there is one thought I would ask you to carry away with you tonight, and it is this. . . ."

Mr. Tucket leaned forward and swept the audience with a slow penetrating gaze.

"*Judge not, that ye be not judged!*"

For several moments there was a deep guilty hush. Then a hoarse male voice came from the back of the tent.

"Good owd Passun, that's wot Oi say! An' bludy good luck to 'im!"

Other voices instantly took up the cry.

"That's roight! Allus said as 'ow 'e were a proper gent!"

"It's a muckin' shame, that's wot it is, the way 'e's been boogered abart!"

"Coom on, nah! Three cheers fer owd Mester Tucket!"

These were heartily accorded, after which the audience broke into a raucous rendering of 'For He's a Jolly Good Fellow.'

Guy, roosting in the branches of the copper beech, grinned delightedly.

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"I DON'T know how to thank you, Random, I really don't. Now that the Gumption Charity Fund is cleared up I feel a new man. For the first time for weeks I've had a sound night's sleep. What's more, I've recovered my appetite."

Mr. Tucket attacked his third helping of ham and eggs and beamed across the breakfast table at Guy who was busily stuffing Byron with kipper dipped in marmalade. "A masterly performance, my boy. Even now I can scarcely believe it's true."

Guy shrugged modestly. "As I assured you at the outset, sir, these things can always be arranged."

"So it seems. And I reproach myself for doubting it. But I must confess that after you'd been here for three days, and nothing appeared to be developing, I began to wonder."

"Quite so. Many of my clients are similarly baffled. But all these cases follow much the same course. It's the Random Technique. First, a painstaking reconnaissance; next, a patient probing for the enemy's weak spots, combined with a methodical build-up of one's own forces. Time passes, nothing seems to be happening. Then, suddenly, at the critical moment, we unleash the shattering blow that throws the enemy off balance. This we delivered last night. Now we enter the last phase: the breakthrough, the ruthless exploitation of initial gains, leading to the final kill." He paused to daub marmalade on another kipper. "Inside the next twelve hours it will all be over."

Mr. Tucket dropped his tools. "Inside twelve hours ! But we've only just begun——"

He was interrupted by the entry of Mrs. Musk. "Excuse me, sir, but there's something I think you should know at once. Cecil tells me that Sir Walter Ramage is closing Tickle-Fancy Spinney."

Nan emerged from *The Times* with such violence that she overturned the teapot. "What ! Close Tickle-Fancy Spinney ! But that's impossible. Why, it's—it's nothing short of a breach of Magna Charta ; not to mention Habeas Corpus, the Bill of Rights and the Seven Points of Chartism."

"All the same, ducky, he's closing it. Cecil says he's got half a dozen men up there erecting barbed wire and *No Trespassing* notices and I don't know what. I understand there's a deal of bad feeling about it in the village."

Guy kicked back his chair and jumped up. "This is clearly a direct result of our anonymous letter campaign. We've stampeded him into a first-class blunder, and we must exploit it instantly. Mr. Tucket ! You must get up there at once and play your part as the dauntless-breasted Village Hampden notwithstanding the local Petty Tyrant. This is a wonderful opportunity to swing public opinion still further in our favour. There's not a moment to lose."

Two minutes later they were speeding down the lane towards the village, Nan leading on her sports-bike followed by Mr. Tucket on his tricycle with Guy crouching on the luggage-rack in rear, Byron clutched to his breast.

"Watch yourself on the corners, Random !" cried Mr. Tucket, accelerating with the full force of his mighty thighs. "The last time I took a pillion passenger we had a nasty mishap in the duck-pond."

They went into the corner at the end of the lane at full bore, with bulb-horn blasting. Guy felt the machine side-slip, judder sickeningly and start to heel over. Spurred by panic, he instinctively took the necessary corrective action. Clamping Byron under his left arm, he grasped the saddle pillar with his right hand and flung his body over to the left in the style of the side-car rider on a racing motor-cycle combination. The result was masterly. The tricycle went through the bend in a tight controlled drift, and they were away down the village street at maximum velocity.

"Stout work, Random," cried Mr. Tucket, crouching still lower over his handlebars. "And bounce up and down a bit as we hit the straight. Gives better wheel-grip and acceleration."

For some moments Guy was filled with an intense exhilaration by their headlong progress; but this rapidly changed to alarm when he realised that Mr. Tucket was intent upon over-taking Nan and showing her a clean pair of wheels. Bucketing and lurching down the road, they gradually closed the gap.

"We'll show her there's life in the old Dad yet, Random! Watch me shove her off the road on the next bend."

Tottering on his precarious perch, with Byron sandwiched against his ribs, Guy awaited the inevitable disaster. And outside Major Gantree's gate it happened—but not as he had expected. With a last desperate spurt Mr. Tucket overhauled his quarry, tooted his hooter at her derisively and cut sharply across her bows. There was a grinding of metal, a yell of rage, a resounding crash.

When Guy ventured to look back he saw Nan arising from the same nettle-filled ditch into which he

himself had been driven by Sir Walter Ramage. She was hopping up and down in a brisk fandango of choler ; and her language was appalling.

" Wonderful flow she's got, hasn't she ? " said Mr. Tucket, easing up and mopping his face. " Between ourselves, I quite often annoy the child deliberately, just for the pleasure of hearing her say all those things that my cloth forbids me to say myself."

Ahead of them, several dozen villagers were clustered on the grass verge, staring fixedly across the broad sloping expanse of pasturage at the foot of which lay Tickle-Fancy Spinney with the Turvey homestead nestling in its forward edge. So intent were they that they failed to notice the arrival of Guy and the Rector who dismounted from their machine and sauntered up discreetly in rear.

The rumour was only all too true. From the road Sir Walter's workmen could be seen driving stout stakes into the turf around the perimeter of the spinney and unloading reels of barbed wire from a motor-truck. Already three freshly painted *No Trespass* notice-boards stared forbiddingly from the trees.

" He's certainly making a proper job of it, " muttered Mr. Tucket. " A regular barricade."

" True, " agreed Guy. " And it doesn't seem very popular, either."

This was evident from the behaviour of the spectators on the roadside. There was a steady hum of nattering chatter punctuated by explosive grunts of disgust and shrill squawks of expostulation. Jeering shouts and derisive whistles were directed at the workmen around the spinney ; and when yet another notice-board was lifted from the truck there was a concerted fusillade of cat-calls.

At this point Nan came up, having at last exhumed

herself and her machine from the ditch outside Major Gantree's bungalow. Her arrival, heralded by a fresh flow of eloquence, drew the attention of the spectators to the presence of the Rectory party.

"Whoy, look 'oo's 'ere ! It's Mester Tucket. . . . Well, I niver ! Owd Parson's turned oop. . . . Marnin', Rector. . . . Marnin' yer Riverence. . . ."

Mr. Tucket responded courteously but reservedly to these greetings from his flock who, but so recently, had been heaping insults upon him. His coolness made itself felt, and for some moments there was an uneasy hush. Then the ex-organ-blower, a furtive type called Terence Treadle, sidled forward.

"See wot theer a-doin' of, sir ? Closin' the Spinney."

"So it would appear."

"Well, it ain't roight, sir ! "

Mr. Tucket rubbed his chin judicially. "On the contrary, Terence. Sir Walter is perfectly within his rights. The land is his to do what he likes with."

"*'Im !* 'E wants ter goo an' tek a runnin' jump at 'isself. . . . It's a proper shame, that's wot it is, a-closin' of yon Spinney ! "

This fighting-talk met with warm support. Sir Walter's stock was clearly sagging sharply.

Mr. Tucket, however, refused to be drawn, and leisurely lit his pipe before replying. When at last he spoke his tone was level and detached.

"As I have already pointed out, Sir Walter has every right to close Tickle-Fancy Spinney if he so chooses. And I must say that I'm surprised to hear his action being criticised in this fashion. I was under the impression that, so far as Dodder-in-the-Bottom is concerned, Sir Walter could do no wrong. There seems to be a sudden change of opinion."

The shaft went home and there was another guilty silence. Mr. Tucket shook a jet of saliva out of his pipe and folded his arms.

"However, in this case, there does seem to be some ground for comment. Whilst insisting that Sir Walter is fully within his rights, I feel that his present action is, perhaps, somewhat hasty and ill-considered. Tickle-Fancy Spinney, as we all know, has from time immemorial played a vital part in the social life of this village. It is one of the most ancient and cherished of our local amenities ; and this sudden closure is certainly a rude shock.

"But I feel sure that the whole matter is no more than an unfortunate misunderstanding. Sir Walter is, after all, a newcomer amongst us. He cannot be expected to appreciate the full significance of the Spinney : the quaint and homely customs so long associated with it, the multitudinous memories, both grave and gay, which it holds for all of us. Once this is pointed out to him, I feel confident that he will relent and reverse his decision. I understand that many of you have found him very open-handed. No doubt you will find him equally open-minded."

Mr. Tucket looked round his audience with polite indifference. "This affair, of course, has nothing to do with me. But since you seem to feel so keenly about it, I suggest that you appoint a spokesman, without delay, to call upon Sir Walter and lay the case before him."

As he turned away, Terence Treadle was thrust forward by his neighbours amid muttered exhortations. Flushing hotly, he looked down at his dung-lacquered boots.

"Mester Tucket, sir. . . ."

"Yes, Terence ? What is it ? "

"We was wonderin', sir . . . we was thinkin' loike . . ."

"You were wondering what?"

"If—if you'd speak ter Sir Walter abaht this 'ere. We reckon as 'ow you could 'andle it a lot better than wot we could."

Mr. Tucket gazed around him with well feigned astonishment. "I, Terence? But surely I am scarcely the man to represent the village in a matter such as this. In the old days, perhaps, yes. But of late I seem to have lost the confidence of my parishioners. Indeed it has been made very clear to me that my services, in any capacity, are no longer needed or desired."

A murmur of protest arose, and Terence was again shoved forward.

"Well, sir, I reckon as 'ow there 'ave been some misunderstandings, as ycr moight say. But speakin fer meself, I 'ope as 'ow ycr'll let boygones bc boygones an' . . ."

There was another unanimous show of approva during which Guy prompted the next move.

"You've played 'em long enough, sir. Now yield gracefully."

Mr. Tucket nodded and raised his hand. "This sudden renewal of confidence in me—whether deservec or not—comes as a very pleasant surprise. And in view of the urgency of your request I feel it would be churlish to refuse. I will undertake, therefore, to try to persuade Sir Walter to reverse this unhappy decision I make no promises, of course; but as one who ha always had the interests of this village and its inhabitants closely at heart, I shall do my best. Of tha you can rest assured."

"Nice work, sir," said Guy as they turned awa amidst warm manifestations of gratitude. "You

handled it beautifully. You're on the way up, fast. And when the Spinney is re-opened they'll be down on their knees to you in the streets."

Mr. Tucket shrugged and climbed back into the saddle. "*When* it's re-opened. If I know anything about it, the fellow will flatly refuse to see me, never mind listen to me."

"But he'll see *me*," replied Guy quietly. "And listen to me. Tickle-Fancy Spinney will be open again tonight."

"What!"

Guy smiled and waved Mr. Tucket forward. "Leave it to me, sir. Random will arrange. . . . No, I'll walk back, thanks. I've a very important telephone call to put through from the public kiosk at eleven o'clock."

At eleven o'clock the telephone bell trilled in the hall. Laura Stain looked up from the shopping-list that she was checking with the daily help, Mrs. Tattle, in the drawing-room.

"Do you mind answering it? I don't suppose it's anything important."

She put down her pencil and leaned forward in her chair, listening. From the hall came the rattle of the receiver followed by Mrs. Tattle's characteristic response: "'Ullo! 'Oo's theer?' A moment later there was an exclamation of surprise and a patter of hasty footsteps. Laura suppressed a smile as Mrs. Tattle hustled back into the room.

"It's Sir Walter Ramage, m'm. Wants ter speak ter yer personally."

"Sir Walter Ramage? What can he want with me, I wonder?"

"Don't know, m'm. But 'e says it's urgent."

Laura got up. "Very well, I'll speak to him. . . . No, don't go, Mrs. Tattle. I want to finish that list. Just help yourself to a glass of sherry. I shan't be long."

She went out into the hall, leaving the drawing-room door open behind her.

"Laura Stain speaking."

From the other end of the wire came Guy's clipped drawl. "Greetings! I gather that Mrs. Tattle was duly impressed by my impersonation?"

"Yes."

"Splendid. You've left the door open? You're quite sure she can overhear what you say?"

"Certainly."

"Good. That means it'll be all round the village in the next half-hour. If you're ready we'll begin."

In the drawing-room Mrs. Tattle was already edging nearer to the open doorway, her mouth agape, her ears visibly distending. Laura's voice floated in from the hall, low and clear.

"By all means, Sir Walter. Please do speak quite frankly. . . . Yes, that's correct. I sunbathe in the garden every afternoon. . . . What! I'm being spied upon by the village people. . . . Oh, Sir Walter! How very embarrassing. I hadn't the slightest idea. . . . Yes, yes, please tell me exactly what's going on."

There was a lengthy pause.

"Well, I don't know what to say, Sir Walter, I really don't. But it's obvious that I shall have to give up my sunbathing at once. Apart from my own embarrassment, it's certainly most undesirable that the village people should be indulging their baser instincts in this fashion. . . . What? There's an alternative solution, you say? . . . Yes, please do go on. I'm listening."

Another lengthy pause.

"Yes, I see what you mean : a three-sided arrangement of screens with the open side facing the house. . . . Exactly. I should be able to enjoy the afternoon sun without being overlooked by anybody—except, possibly, from the church tower. . . . No, no, I was only joking, of course. I'm sure we can rule out that possibility. . . . No, don't apologise, please. I'm very glad you *have* told me about it. I'm not unduly prudish, I hope, but the idea of being spied upon in the nude is most unpleasant. And I do most certainly agree with you that the villagers should be prevented from wasting their time and inflaming their animal passions in this fashion. . . . Yes, yes. I shall see the carpenter at once and get him to make some suitable screens. . . . I'm most grateful for the suggestion. I shouldn't like to be obliged to give up my sunbathing, especially now that I've promised the Turvey girls that they can come along and join me. . . . Oh, yes ! They asked my permission the other day, and I really felt I couldn't refuse them. They're such nice modest girls, and as they pointed out, their own small garden is too exposed for decent girls to lie about in. . . . Very well then, Sir Walter. That's that. And again my best thanks. Good-bye."

When Laura re-entered the drawing-room Mrs. Tattle was back by the writing-table, poring over the shopping-list with exaggerated concentration.

"We won't bother with that now, Mrs. Tattle. I'd like you to run along to the carpenter and ask him to call here at once."

Guy was reclining in the chaise-longue under the copper beech, sipping his pre-luncheon manzanilla, when Nan flashed in through the gateway on her

sports-bike. Yelping shrilly, she shot across the drive, through a flower-bed, and halted alongside him with a spectacular dirt-track slide.

"Guy, you'll never guess what's happened! Sir Walter's done it again! Not content with closing Tickle-Fancy Spinney, he's now put a stop to gandering."

"Indeed?"

"Indeed! Is that all you've got to say? I met Toby Gantree in the post office just now and he says the village is seething. According to Mrs. Tattle, Sir Walter telephoned Mrs. Stain this morning and told her all about it. And, on his advice, she's called in the carpenter to erect screens on the lawn. The gandereros are going berserk; especially as they've all bought these expensive binoculars and constructed these elaborate ganderstands. And what makes it even worse is that Mrs. Stain has invited the Turvey girls to join her. Believe me, the *aficionados* will just about blow their craters when they realise what they're going to miss. All that wealth of assorted knick-knacks on view, and no one able to catch the weeniest glimpse!"

"Unless I'm much mistaken there'll be somebody who'll be catching a glimpse," murmured Guy.

"What's that you say?"

He shrugged and got up as the luncheon bell proclaimed the customary stupefying midday beano. "Just a passing thought, my love. By the way, is there anywhere in the house I can use as a dark-room?"

"For photography, you mean? Why yes, of course. There's the Black Hole of Calcutta: the lumber-room in the north wing. What goes on?"

"Just one of my hobbies, ducky. And now come along to luncheon. You must be starving. It's fully

two hours since you had a pair of kippers, two fried eggs-and-b and three rounds of toast-and-marmo."

At two o'clock Guy slipped out of the Rectory and padded down the lane on his way to the church. As on the previous occasion he was wearing his sober grey suit and carrying the Monster Fun Book from the W.C. library under his arm ; for now it was more desirable than ever to give the impression of a devout student intent upon spiritual meditation. But this time there was a notable difference in one item of his outfit. Instead of the Rector's binocular, it was his own high-precision 35-mm. camera that was concealed under his jacket.

As he was in good time he decided to make a circuit of the village before going to the church. This manoeuvre proved rewarding, for as he approached the village Hall he had the pleasure of meeting the six Turvey girls bouncing along the pavement and ostentatiously brandishing bottles of anti-sunburn lotion.

Topsy greeted him with her habitual heartiness.
" 'Ello, Mester Random ! Off prayin' again ? "

Guy replied with his crossed-finger act and a murmured *pax vobiscum !*, at the same time nimbly side-stepping into the roadway as the young ladies began to envelop him in a pincer movement of jutting breasts and saucy grins.

" Don't know 'ow you do it," persisted Topsy chattily. " This prayin' caper, I mean. Beats me 'ow you keep your mind on the job. I've tried it myself, often. But as soon as I close me eyes, I get thinkin' of all kinds of things—you'd be surprised."

" No doubt."

" Some of the things I think of—well, reelly ! Seein' visions, I suppose you'd call it."

" Quite so."

" Our Mam says it's Satan a-temptin' of me, an' I must strive to think of somethin' else."

" Very sound advice, I'm sure."

" But some'ow there doesn't seem to be anythin' else to think of. . . . If you see what I mean ? "

" It is a common difficulty, I understand. And now, if you'll excuse me, I must be getting along."

Guy backed away and the Misses Turvey reluctantly moved on.

" Well, be seein' you, Mester Random. 'Ope as 'ow you 'ave a nice pray. Me and me sisters is off sunbathin' with Mrs. Stain—in the altogether, as they say." Topsy sniggered provocatively. " Talk about seein' the sights ! But I shouldn't be talkin' like this to you, should I, Mester Random ? You'll be ever so shocked. . . . Cheery-bye ! "

Guy bestowed another blessing on the girls and pressed on. Things were shaping nicely.

Exactly how nicely was confirmed when he reached the duck-pond. Clustered by the railings were three husky youths, one of whom Guy recognised as the young fellow he had seen on the bus. The costly binocular dangled from his hand, and he was holding forth indignantly to his two mates.

" Can't see a bludy thing, I tell yer ! I just been up in me muckin' ganderstand and 'ad a gander. Three bludy gret screens nigh on ten foot 'igh. Yer'd niver see nowt exceptin' from the 'ouse."

" An' them Turvey girls an' all. It fair makes yer spit blood. That muckin' Ramage wants doin'. Whoy the 'ell couldn't 'e moind 'is own muckin' business ! "

" An' me just gone an' spent thirty quid on these 'ere perishin' glasses ! "

So enraged were they that they scarcely glanced at

Guy as he strolled up. But the opportunity to add fuel to the flames was too good to miss. He nodded and smiled benignly.

"Good day to you, lads! More nature study, I see. Splendid, splendid! I trust you will have an agreeable afternoon's sport."

A moment later he sprang for his life onto the grass verge as the all too familiar grey Daimler, with Sir Walter at the wheel, swept past him on the bend and disappeared through the stone-pillared gateway a hundred yards ahead.

At this, Guy quickened his pace and stepped out smartly for the graveyard. Within a couple of minutes he had gained the south porch and was carefully shutting the church door behind him. Moving soundlessly on his rubber-soled desert boots, he made for the vestry under the tower. He slipped around the moth-eaten curtain and crossed to the dilapidated robe-cupboard standing against the wall. Stowing the *Monster Fun Book* on the floor, he edged his way in amongst the clutter of frowsy cassocks and gently closed the doors, save for a narrow central crack.

Fifteen minutes later he was beginning to feel extremely uncomfortable. The interior of the cupboard was atrociously hot and airless; and he was obliged to stand rigidly upright, since the slightest movement caused a loud creaking of rotten woodwork. The sweat began to trickle down his ribs. Moths fluttered round his ears. Unidentified insects conducted an intricate social life on his face and forehead. Moreover, something was nibbling away pertinaciously at his right ankle. A mouse? If so, it must be one of unexampled voracity, for already it seemed to be well on its way through the suede of his boot towards the living flesh. And worst of all was the asphyxiating

miasma of stale sweat and mouldy serge exhaling from the robes amongst which he was concealed.

He squinted down at the luminous hands of his watch. Twenty minutes only had passed. It felt like a couple of hours. His vexation mounted. Could it be that he had miscalculated? Was he going to draw a blank after all this? One thing was certain: it was beyond the power of man or beast to remain much longer in this stifling hutch.

Then he heard it: the soft clink of an iron latch. He held his breath, edged an inch forward and applied his right eye to the crack between the cupboard doors.

Tiptoeing footsteps approached the vestry. There was a faint rattle from the brass rings of the curtain. Then the stocky figure of Sir Walter Ramage crossed Guy's line of sight, making for the tower doorway. Clink . . . squeak . . . clink . . . silence. . . .

After five minutes, timed by his watch, Guy crept out of the cupboard and took a deep grateful gulp of fresh air. When he had dried the sweat off his hands he unbuttoned his jacket and brought his camera to the ready. Under his expert fingers the tower door opened without a sound. He went up the stone stairway as silently as a ghost.

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"WELL? What is it now?" Sir Walter looked up irritably from the sheaf of papers on his desk.

"There's a young gentleman called to see you, sir. He says——"

"I'm not seeing anybody this evening; and I

distinctly told you that I wasn't to be disturbed before dinner. Send him away."

"It's the young gentleman who's staying at the Rectory, sir."

"What, that student chap? Well, I'm too busy to be bothered with him or anyone else. Tell him I can't see him."

"*Good evening, Sir Walter. Shall we skip the nonsense?*"

Guy bowed courteously to Mrs. Spindle and advanced into the study, flashing the grin.

Sir Walter whirled around in his swivel chair. "What the devil do you mean by pushing your way in here? Can't you understand plain English? I'm a busy man, and I haven't the time to waste on every Tom, Dick and Harry. . . ."

"But I," replied Guy, "have all the time in the world, so we can share it between us." He pulled around the second armchair by the desk. "And I'm quite sure you're *not* too busy to see me—at least I hope not, for your sake."

He sat down and calmly took out his pipe. Sir Walter, who had sprung to his feet with a threatening gesture, suddenly restrained himself. His quick shrewd glance took in Guy's air of cool self-assurance, the lazy insolent smile in his eyes, the ruthless set of his lips and jaw. In spite of his anger and astonishment he sensed that this was a very different customer from the apologetic young fellow he had so recently threatened with prosecution for careless tricycling. He dismissed Mrs. Spindle and resumed his seat with a show of brusque impatience.

"I'll give you five minutes exactly. What do you want? And what's your name?"

"My name is Random. Guy Random."

Sir Walter could not repress a quick turn of the head.

"It strikes a chord? Perhaps you've heard it mentioned by some of your business associates in London? I'm happy to say that I number some of the biggest names in the City amongst my grateful clients."

"If you're that fixer chap I've heard some of them talking about . . . "

"Fixer!" Guy winced and screwed up his eyes. "Really, Sir Walter, please! I'm a professional Negotiator and prefer to be described as such."

"You can call yourself what you like. All I want to know is why you've come shoving your way in here."

His eyes fixed on the match-flame flickering above his pipe-bowl, Guy spoke softly between puffs. "I've come—to deliver—my ultimatum."

"Your what!"

Guy held up his hand. "Come now! There's nothing to be gained by losing our tempers. If you'll kindly listen to me quietly for a few moments I'm sure we shall speedily arrive at a harmonious understanding and a just and amicable settlement."

Sir Walter's hands locked on the arms of his chair and his eyes narrowed. "Whatever you've got to say, get on with it. I've got work to do."

"Very well; I'll be as brief as possible. A short time ago Miss Nan Tucket called on me at my headquarters in London. She was in a state of great distress; and, on questioning her, I heard a story which aroused both my sympathy and my indignation. A story, moreover, in which your name figured very prominently."

"My name! What're you getting at?"

"I refer to your scandalous and entirely unprovoked persecution of the Rector of this parish, and to your

no less callous determination to crush the love between Nan Tucket and your son Julian. Accordingly, I decided to come down here forthwith and deal with you."

"Deal with me! You impudent young devil! What business is it of yours?"

"It's my business for two reasons, Sir Walter. First, because I'm a parson's son myself and I'm not prepared to stand by and watch a harmless priest being hounded out of his benefice. Second, because I'm of a romantic disposition and I'm not prepared to see young love brutally thwarted."

Sir Walter swallowed convulsively. "You insolent young puppy! I've a damn good mind to take you by the scruff of the neck and kick you out of the place. . . ."

"Come, sir! Manners, manners! And it's always unwise to make idle threats—threats which you're in no position to carry out."

"Not in a position. . . . What the hell do you mean?"

"I mean, quite simply, that this is your position, *here*." Guy leaned forward and extended his right hand palm upwards. Then he slowly closed his fingers into a locked fist.

Sir Walter half-rose from his chair, his face puce with rage, his mouth working to expel the torrent of abuse that choked his throat. As he raised his right fist and took a pace forward, Guy casually flipped a photograph onto the blotting-pad on the desk.

"Before you do anything which you might have cause to regret, Sir Walter, just take a look at that."

The only sound in the study was the ticking of the clock on the chimney-piece.

Guy lay back in his chair and blew a cloud of smoke at the ceiling. "Portrait of Sir Walter Ramage," he murmured. "Portrait of Sir Walter Ramage—gandering."

He extended his legs and waved his hand. "You can have that one for a keepsake. I have six spare prints, not to mention the original negative."

Shortly afterwards he was smiling into his victim's apoplectic face, patiently filling in the details. "Just in case you haven't fully grasped the situation, allow me to paint the picture for you. First, consider the reactions of the public to any middle-aged man who regularly repairs to the top of a church tower to peer through a binocular at a lady sunbathing in the nude in the privacy of her own garden. Figure to yourself the sniggering gossip, the pitying contempt, the insufferable leg-pulling, the ludicrous label that he will carry pinned between his shoulders for the rest of his life. Then consider the reactions of the public to Sir Walter Ramage caught in a similar predicament : Sir Walter Ramage, eminent industrialist, Deputy Lieutenant of the County, Justice of the Peace, notorious watchdog of public morals. . . . Good. I see you *are* considering. Don't hurry. There is ample scope for the free play of the imagination."

Sir Walter suddenly emerged from his paralysis and slapped his hand down on the photograph. "It's all bluff, that's what it is ! Just a lot of damn bluff ! You've got no proof that I—what I mean is that for all you know—"

"You've been sitting on top of the church tower with a binocular just to study the fascinating habits of the local birds and bees ? Come now, Sir Walter, let's be sensible about this. Of course I know very well that this photograph wouldn't cut much ice in a

court of law, say. But I'm not envisaging its effect in a court of law. I'm restricting my fancies to its effect in, say, the public bar of the Dropped Clanger—tonight."

"By God, you wouldn't——"

"If necessary, I shan't hesitate to. And there, I think, there would be little doubt about the nature of your hobby. Nor would you find much sympathy, I fear, in view of your unsportsmanlike action this morning."

"My what?"

"I refer to your advising Mrs. Stain to erect those screens—thereby rendering completely useless every ganderstand in the locality except your own. No, I don't think that an exhibition of this photograph would make you very popular."

"It's a damn lie, I tell you. Why, I've never even spoken to the woman."

"Oh, come! What about the telephone conversation you had with her this morning, and which Mrs. Tattle couldn't help overhearing? I'm sure you'll be glad to know that Mrs. Stain is very, very grateful to you."

"Why, you . . . you . . ."

"Exactly. I have something of a talent for vocal mimicry; and I had an excellent opportunity to study your conversational style when you were being so nasty to me about my tricycle the other day."

There was a taut hush, broken only by Sir Walter's rapid breathing and the creaking of his fingers on the ebony ruler on his desk.

Guy sighed and shook his head. "No, I don't think we need worry about *proof*. This photograph, plus gossip—malicious gossip—will do very well; especially when the subject is an eminent local

personality whose domineering temperament has made him lots of enemies. It would be a great pity if you found yourself obliged to pack up and leave the district just when you've got your new factory into full production, and just when your name is being favourably considered by the Elderbury Conservative Committee as candidate at the forthcoming by-election."

Sir Walter's voice was a rasping croak. "What is this? Blackmail? Is it money you're after?"

Again Guy winced and shuddered. "Really, Sir Walter, I must ask you to moderate your language. Please remember there's a gentleman present. As for money, I shall, of course, expect my professional fee, but that's by the way. The chief points in my ultimatum are five in number. Perhaps you would like me to enumerate them. . . . Yes? Very well.

"One: you will immediately grant your son full permission to marry Miss Tucket.

"Two: will signalise that happy event by appointing him manager of the factory you are about to open in South Wales. And at a suitable salary.

"Three: you will cease, once and for all, your persecution of Mr. Tucket, and you will resign forthwith from all the official positions you hold in the village.

"Four: you will give Mr. Tucket a full apology in writing for your slanderous allegations regarding his conduct of the Gumption Charity Fund, his magic-lantern lectures and his patronage of the Turvey family.

"Last, but by no means least: you will instantly re-open Tickle-Fancy Spinney in the interests of local health and recreation.

"Those are my demands, and you will undertake to fulfil them in every detail—or else. Meanwhile, I shall retain the copies of that photograph in my files as a guarantee of your good faith."

He got up and knocked out his pipe. "That, I think, is all. Except, of course, for my professional fee for arranging matters in a way which, I venture to hope, will prove satisfactory to all parties. Five hundred guineas."

In the hall he met Mrs. Spindle hovering by the foot of the stairs.

"Excuse me, Mr. Random, but I was just wondering if—if everything has gone off all right, as you might say. You see, I guessed it might have something to do with my Julian and Miss Nan—and I'm that anxious to see them married and settled down! It's a wicked shame them having to keep on waiting like this; it's a gen nature, in a manner of speaking. That poor boy's fair pining away. Off his food, not getting his sleep, and . . ."

Guy patted her arm. "Tranquillise yourself, Mrs. Spindle. Everything went off perfectly. Half our problem is safely settled. Your Julian has his father's full permission to marry. It only remains now to get Mr. Tucket's permission for Nan."

"And I'm afraid that won't be very easy, sir. The Rector's properly upset, what with one thing and another, and I can't say I blame him."

"I've no doubt we shall be able to make him see reason in the end. After all, he has no particular grudge against Julian personally. It's only because he's Sir Walter's son. And now I must be off. Cheer up, Mrs. Spindle! We'll have your little ram-lamb safely mated before long."

He stopped at the door. "By the way, Mrs. Spindle,

what would *you* do if Julian married Nan and went down to South Wales to manage the new factory? Would you consider going with them—at a reasonable salary, of course?"

"Why, yes, sir! I'd like nothing better. Indeed, I'd never have stayed on here all these years if I hadn't felt that I ought to look after the boy."

"Splendid. And if you take my advice you'll begin packing your bags without delay."

"I've not seen you in your killer mood before. It suits you." Laura gave him his gin and sniffed appreciatively. "I smell blood. I suspect you've come away with the lot: both ears, the foot and the tail."

Guy nodded. "Yes, it went very well; apart from the session in the vestry cupboard which was an ordeal I would not willingly repeat."

"And he responded to treatment?"

"He did. There was a little preliminary tom-boy stuff, of course. But as soon as I turned the heat on he melted a fair treat. I must say I felt a bit sorry for him in the end."

"Indeed?"

"Well, it was rather like shooting a sitter. After all, who could possibly resist gandering when offered such a ravishing target?"

She slowly unveiled the emeralds. "Why, Guy, I do believe you're paying me a compliment at last—in your own stiff-lipped fashion."

"I am. Probably the greatest compliment I've ever paid any woman."

"You speak in riddles."

"I mean that I, too, have gandered."

"So I understand. But only in a way of business."

" You're mistaken. Something very remarkable happened when I was making my investigation on top of the church tower on Sunday afternoon. Something I would never have believed possible."

" I can't wait."

" I mean that, having gandered for business, I subsequently gandered for pleasure."

" Guy ! "

" Precisely. For the first time in my twenty years' career as a professional Negotiator I mingled pleasure with business."

" Why, you little pet ! "

" I know : I *am* rather sweet. And now, if you shut your eyes and hold out your hand, I'll give you your wages. Five hundred guineas. The cheque's made out to me, of course ; but if you'll lend me a pen I'll write you one on my account this instant."

" Five hundred guineas. That's very civil of you, Guy. You certainly put the screw on."

" No doubt he'll manage to fiddle it under expenses."

" But what about yourself ? "

" That's it : my fee for arranging matters. But I took this case on free of charge, whereas you've been assisting me on a professional basis. Therefore the fee is yours, and very well earned I may say."

He wrote the cheque, finished his drink and got up.
" Well, that's that. I must get back to the Rectory. There's work to be done. Pretty tough work, too, I've a notion. Unless I'm much mistaken, forcing Sir Walter to let his son marry the Rector's daughter will be child's play compared to persuading the Rector to let his daughter marry Sir Walter's son."

She waved him back to his chair. " Don't disturb yourself. It's already done."

" I beg your pardon ? "

"It's all over. Mr. Tucket granted his unreserved permission half an hour ago."

Guy slowly sat down again. "Is this some rib-tickling jest? Because, if so . . ."

"Not at all. Just me earning my five hundred guineas."

He crossed his legs and held out his glass. "Bigger and harder, please. And I'm listening."

"Just putting two and two together and making five. During my *tête-à-tête* with Julian the other night—which you so officially interrupted—I found myself wondering how such a charming and gentle young man could possibly be the son of such a tough customer as Sir Walter Ramage. And from certain remarks the boy let fall I could see that he, in his own way, shared my bewilderment. Then, encouraged by my sympathetic manner, he unfolded his family history—including the very interesting fact that his mother, before her marriage, was Lucy Vervain."

"Lucy Vervain! You don't say so? The likeness is there all right, now you come to mention it."

"Exactly. Well, after that I put my thinking-cap on; and bearing in mind Lucy's notoriously generous habits, it occurred to me that she might possibly have been a little generous twenty years ago."

"So?"

"I used to know her quite well at one time, so I telephoned her, explained Julian's predicament, and suggested that if there was anything she could do about it, now was the time. She motored straight down here this afternoon and went up to see Mr. Tucket whilst you were engaged with Sir Walter. She was back in half an hour with everything settled."

"Very satisfactory. Mr. Tucket is just the man to

appreciate a generous disposition, being endowed with one himself. . . . Who was it, by the way?"

"Giles Skindle, I rather think. I know he used to stay here, years ago, with Evelyn Chancery. And his first play, you remember, was called *Tickle My Fancy*."

"Hello, Guy. Such ages since we met."

He turned to see the familiar cap of coarse black curls, the enormous kohl-shadowed eyes, the helplessly hospitable lips : Lucy Vervain whose tally of broken homes and breached promises had earned her first place on the toast-list wherever two or three lawyers were gathered together.

"Lucy ! My favourite client. This is indeed an unexpected pleasure."

She stepped back and held up her hand. "No, Guy. I'm feeling virtuous for once, and it makes a nice change. If you kiss me I revert to normal."

"Good works become you, Lucy. More beautiful than ever : positively ethereal."

"It's the strain, Guy. I must get back tonight before I break down."

"So soon ?"

She shrugged, and gave him the look reserved for Counsel for the Plaintiff. "Yes, Guy, so soon. With that sentimental heart of yours you're no doubt yearning to stage a touching family reunion scene and all the rest of it. But it's not my style, I fear. I should only be an embarrassment to all concerned. As soon as Laura's fed me I'll get back to civilisation."

"Then I'll beg a ride with you. I travelled down by rail : an experience which will leave its mark on me up to and beyond the grave." He went to the door. "See you in an hour or so. I must just go up to the Rectory and make my final report and farewells. . . . I'll use your telephone, Laura, if I may.

I want a word with Julian if I can get hold of him before I go."

The victory banquet had been a formidable ordeal indeed ; and now, at nine o'clock, swollen with food and sweating champagne, Guy was making his farewells. Equipped with his modest bag and massive golfing umbrella-cum-seatstick, he stood on the threshold of Dodder Rectory, surrounded by Mr. Tucket, Nan, Mrs. Musk and Cecil. The only missing member of the household was Byron, whose absence Guy noted with genuine disappointment, for he had taken an uncommon fancy to the animal.

Mr. Tucket simultaneously wrung his hand and thumped him punishingly between the shoulder blades. " Well, Random, I've said it before and I say it again : I don't know how to thank you for all you've done. You've accomplished not only a dazzling coup of negotiation but also a notable work of true Christian charity. And, quite apart from the task in hand, I must tell you how greatly I've enjoyed your company. Your sanguine temperament and lively wit have been a wonderful tonic ; your unfailing tact and courtesy a soothing balm in time of trouble ; the measured periods and lofty moral tone of your discourses a real pleasure to listen to. I can only assure you that henceforth my house is yours, and if I can do anything for you at any time you have only to ask."

Guy smiled and rubbed his mangled fingers. " You can pray for me, sir. In view of the peculiar hazards of our occupation, it is a comfort of which we professional Negotiators always stand particularly in need."

When Mr. Tucket stepped back Nan sprang forward and wrapped herself around Guy in an access of undisguised emotion.

" Darling, what can I possibly say, except that I love you like I don't know what, and that you're the sweetest little jube-jube that ever was ! You will come to my wedding, won't you ? "

" Most certainly."

" And come and stay with us amongst all those mouldering old Bards and mountain goats ? "

" I keenly look forward to it."

" And stand godfather to the first one I whip out from under ? "

" A singular privilege indeed."

She held off for a moment, peering into his eyes. Then she rewound herself about his person and began to clamber methodically up his frontage.

" Now for it, Random ! What I've been bursting my weldings to get at these last six weeks. You're unemployed now, remember ? "

With this, she clasped her hands behind his head and locked her lips on his in what was not so much a kiss as an advanced act of cannibalism.

In due course Guy pushed his hair out of his eyes, pulled his tie from under his ear and groped for his luggage.

" We Tuckets are all the same," observed the Rector apologetically. " We just don't know our own strength."

" It's me feelin's," said Nan, aglow with passion. " They get top-side of me."

" In which case," said Guy hastily, as she advanced to re-mount him, " you'd better get top-side of that." He pointed to her bicycle propped against the porch. " You're five minutes late already."

" Late ? Late for what ? "

" Since nine o'clock the boy Julian has been awaiting you in Tickle-Fancy Spinney."

There was a spatter of gravel, a flash of chromium plating and a whirl of brown legs. Her voice was faintly audible receding down the Rectory lane.

" . . . and don't forget about being godfather. You'd better put it in your diary right away. . . . "

Guy paused in the gateway and looked back. Mrs. Musk was frankly weeping into her apron. Cecil was grinning blindly through the turgid thicket of his fringe. Mr. Tucket's arm was raised in a Roman salute.

" Not good-bye, Random, but *au revoir* ! And pray convey my respects to those two charming ladies. The Lord be with you, dear lad ! "

Lucy and Laura were finishing their coffee.

" All over ? "

" Yes. Everything neatly parcelled up and the blue bow tied on top."

" You sound a little depressed," said Laura.

" I think I am. I've really enjoyed this job. The return to my boyhood ambience has tweaked my nostalgic nerve. And gandering . . . I shall always look back on gandering as one of the most interesting and instructive experiences in my career."

" Well," said Lucy, " if you're ready, we'll get moving. It's a long drive, and I was up by eleven o'clock this morning."

" I'm ready when you are. I've put my modest luggage in the car."

They stood up, but Laura remained coiled on the sofa, her eyes fixed on Guy in the blank, cat's stare.

" There's just one small point you seem to have overlooked, Guy."

He turned his head sharply. " I beg your pardon ? "

" I refer to our . . . understanding."

"I'm afraid I don't quite follow you."

"You will," she murmured, rising swiftly from her nest of cushions. "Now."

She took his hand and gave him the dazzling child-like smile. "Your professional duties are concluded. Your amateur ones await you."

Still holding him by the hand, she halted in the doorway. "Forgive my leaving you to entertain yourself for a couple of hours, Lucy. I'll send in more coffee, and you can always take a nap on the sofa."

At midnight Guy took his place beside Lucy who was settling herself impatiently at the wheel of the Lancia. He lowered the window and inhaled his last gust of nocturnal flower-scent mingled with *Madrigal Triste*.

"Good-bye, Laura."

"Good-bye, Guy."

"You've been a real pleasure to work with."

"And you to play with."

"Remember me very kindly to Toby Gantree and the Turvey girls—oh, and by the way, before I forget . . ."

"Yes?"

"Mrs. Spindle is leaving Sir Walter and going with Nan and Julian. There'll be a vacancy for a house-keeper."

Half-way to London, Guy, dozing in the passenger seat, was roused by an exclamation from Lucy.

"Guy, wake up! There's a cat in the car."

"A what? Don't be ridiculous."

"There is, I tell you. I just heard it mew."

"You're suffering from hallucinations . . ."

A warm furry mass alighted on his right shoulder.

Whiskers delicately tickled his cheek. Two tiger eyes, all enlarged black pupil in the half-light, peered into his own. A plaintive mew sounded in his ear.

"*Byron!* My dear fellow!"

Lucy gave him a sidelong glance. "You can shed that tear, Random. I shan't tell any one."

"Thank you. You see, for the first time in my life I know what it is to be loved. I find the experience disconcerting."

16

"WAKEY, WAKEY! You're not listening."

Clare Crest looked over her copy of *The Times* at Guy who was embedded in an armchair opposite to her, fondling his post-luncheon cigar.

He heaved himself out of his stupor. "Sorry, my love. You shouldn't feed me so well. You were saying?"

"I was saying that there's something here that will interest you. I seem to remember that when you made that safari into the hinterland recently you got mixed up with some people called Ramage."

"Too true. So?"

"Well, there's the announcement of his forthcoming marriage here."

Guy relapsed against the cushions. "Must be some mistake. It was in three weeks ago. I told you: I'm going down on Thursday to be Julian's best man."

"There's no Julian here. It's a Sir Walter Ramage."

"What! Well, well. . . . That's the father, the

tycoon with delusions of grandeur whom I had to be rather strict with. I should have thought that his venture with Lucy Vervain would have permanently cured him of matrimony. Who's he got hold of this time?"

"Just a minute . . . yes, here it is . . . a Mrs. Laura Stain."

Five minutes later Clare again peered over her newspaper. "You're very quiet. Still suffering from shock? The brandy is beside you."

"M'm? No, thanks. I'm thinking."

Presently he sat up and, heaving a profound sigh, reached for the decanter.

Clare put aside the paper. "Still thinking? A penny for them. Why the muffled groans?"

"I've just been making a careful mental survey of Dodder-in-the-Bottom, and a most discouraging thought occurs to me. They'll all have to start building new ganderstands."

THE END